

“Apprenticing Disciples”
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“Passing along the beach of Lake Galilee, he [Jesus] saw Simon and his brother Andrew net-fishing. Fishing was their regular work. Jesus said to them, “Come with me. I’ll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I’ll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass.” They didn’t ask questions. They dropped their nets and followed.”

– Mark 1: 16-18 (The Message)

In many ways, I am an apprentice. When I was younger, I apprenticed with my father in home building and construction. My first job was to pick up bricks and other construction debris on the site. I didn’t like it, but it taught me the importance of keeping the job site clean in order to be productive. In ministry, I have apprenticed with several great pastors, benefitting from their years of experience, their successes and failures. Currently, I am receiving clinical pastoral training as an intern at Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami. In this different setting, I am learning how I can be a blessing to those who are dealing with complex physical illnesses and pain in their time of need.

In each case, I have been given freedom to learn on-the-job, without being asked to be an expert or have all the knowledge or perfect skill. Believe me, there have been times when I have felt uncomfortable and didn’t completely know what I was doing. Fortunately, I have had good coaches who have taught me principles and skills when I needed to know them. I am amazed how I have grown through this process and God has worked with me.

I think this is how Jesus did discipleship with those who followed him. He called them and put them to work in the kingdom as his apprentices. When the going got tough, or there was a need for information and learning, he taught them what they needed to know during times of reflection and evaluation. Then, he sent them back out to do it again.

How different this is from much of the discipleship that is done in the church today! On my Christian journey, I have attended weekly discipleship classes that have met for up to two years! As a pastor, I have asked parishioners to do the same. I have worked through the fill-in-the blank notebooks; I’ve sat through hours of teaching and processed principles and theology; I’ve gone through the discipleship bases - first, second, third! - and slid into home to get that prized certificate. Interestingly, in all this training, I was never asked to go alongside a coach or work with another believer to engage the need of someone in culture who might benefit from the tangible love of Christ.

This leads me to say that our discipleship training today needs to look different. We need to find a balance between classroom learning (transmission of knowledge and information) and on-the-job apprenticing. We need to find a way of discipleship that allows every 21st century disciple to be Christ’s apprentice in their world.

O.K., enough theory and reflection for this week. Here are a few examples of how we are trying to apprentice disciples in our faith community.

I have taken a couple guys (who are young in faith) to visit people in the hospital as a way of apprenticing. They were with me to pray, converse with the sick, and care for family members. Since then, I have since seen them go and do the same *without me*.

Some of our women and girls are joining together to patronize the small business of a single parent that we know is struggling in many ways and trying to make ends meet to support her children. They are not just purchasing her services, they are apprenticing.

Several of us are joining our neighborhood crime watch group as a way of getting to know and engage our neighbors. Who knows what will happen as we live out the love of Christ with them?

I'm engaging a neighbor who is struggling to find a job and parent his adolescent sons and sharing this need with another father in our faith community. I hope and pray that we can find a way *together* to support and touch him for Christ. This could change the whole family.

I know these are simple examples of apprentice discipleship, but I'm amazed at what people will do *with us* and are willing to do *without us* when they have our permission and support.

Finally, I am experimenting at prayer time, in our faith community, with a way to call out apprentices and allow God's spirit to compel us to act together. As prayer requests are shared, I may ask (without allowing anyone to share inappropriate information) the group to reflect on the real-life needs of one who is mentioned for prayer. For example, "What must it be like to be a frustrated single-parent trying to run a business and care for her children?" "What does she need?" Sometimes, this time of reflection leads to a teachable moment about faith or other topics. Reflecting on the real-life situation allows God to touch our hearts, changes our prayer and call us to action. Then I ask, "What kind of support, help or resourcing can we give to this person or need?" AND, "Who will tangibly bless this person/need with the love of Christ?" Sometimes I ask, "What can we all do to meet this need?" It is interesting what this does to move us into culture to engage real people who may be lost, confused, or needing Christ and His love. Obviously, we cannot carry out this full process for every prayer request each week ... but reflecting on one or two might move a passive believer into being an active apprentice for Christ. Then, we pray.

I'm sure there are many more ways to engage real people and real needs and to grow and make disciples of those who are spiritually interested but disoriented in the world around us. What are your thoughts? What do you think of this apprenticing approach?

Next week: "*A Measure & Vision for the Church Immersed in Culture*"

If you would like to interact and discuss these thoughts further, please email me at billf@flcog.org.