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Multiplying Disciples in African Colleges and Universities

by Mark A. Olander

Introduction

As we all know, the Church in Africa is growing rapidly with the increase of the number of Christians and the establishment of new local churches throughout most of the continent. In his book entitled *Is Africa Cursed?*, Tukunboh Adeyemo points out that “God has blessed and continues to bless Africa spiritually Throughout the continent, with the exception of seven strongly Islamic countries, new churches are being established daily.”¹ He goes on to cite the *World Christian Encyclopaedia* which indicates that, “Africa records an average of 4,000 new converts every day and this puts the Christian population in Africa at more than 50 per cent of the overall population.”² This is great news indeed!

Of course, not all of those who claim to be Christians have a personal relationship with Christ. A certain percentage of them may be nominal Christians and not fully committed disciples of Christ in the truest sense. Nevertheless, the Church in Africa is most certainly exploding in numerical growth. But the question we need to ask ourselves is, “Are we simply *winning converts* to the faith, or are we truly *making disciples*?”

All of us as Christian educators realize that Christ has called us to be involved in helping to fulfill the Great Commission that He gave to His disciples. Jesus told them to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). We all *know* we are supposed to be making disciples, but are we really *doing* that? Furthermore, do we actually know *how* to go about doing that?

The Disciple Making Methods Jesus Used

As we read the Gospels, we see how Jesus poured His life into the lives of twelve men knowing that they would be the ones to carry on the ministry after He left this earth to return to His Father’s right hand in heaven. In his book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, Robert Coleman makes the following insightful observation: “Though he [Jesus] did what he could to help the multitudes, he had to devote himself primarily to a few men, rather than the masses, so that the masses could at last be saved. This was the genius of his strategy.”³

¹ Tukunboh Adeyemo, *Is Africa Cursed?* Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive Publishers Limited, 2009, p. 27.

² Adeyemo, *Is Africa Cursed?*, p. 28.

³ Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. Grand Rapids: Revell, 1963, p. 31.

It takes commitment and time to effectively disciple others. There is no short cut or mini-course in Christian discipleship. I've found that two of the best ways of discipling others are to work with a small group of young Christians, and to work one-on-one with individuals. Both approaches can be very effective and they work well together. Over the years, God has given me the privilege of discipling several Christian young men in here in Africa using a combination of both approaches. Small group Bible studies appeal to us here in Africa because we enjoy doing things with others in a group setting. But I've also found that many people respond well to individual discipleship because it enables them to experience the love and guidance of an older Christian who is willing to mentor them.

1. The Small Group Approach

Let's look first at the small group approach to disciple making. It seems this was Jesus' primary approach in training His apostles. So how do we go about working with a small group of Christians? First of all, we need to pray for the Lord to direct us to individuals who are eager to be a part of a small band of Christians who desire to help one another grow in Christlikeness. Second, we need to establish a regular time of meeting. I have found that meeting on a weekly basis usually works the best. Third, it is important to secure a firm commitment from each member to attend meetings faithfully and complete any assignments that are given. Fourth, we should select some method of studying God's Word or biblical topics. Fifth, our time together should consist of several components including: studying and discussing the meaning and application of God's Word to our lives, openly sharing our prayer concerns, and praying for one another's needs. Sixth, we should agree on assignments that are to be completed before our next meeting. Seventh, it is also important for the group to plan times for outreach and ministry to others.

So what would a small group approach look like in the context of a theological school here in Africa? Let me share two examples from personal experience. The first Bible college my wife and I were assigned to teach at here in Africa was in the country of Kenya. A few years after we began teaching there, my wife and I felt God was leading us to begin a discipleship group for students of the college. We announced to all the students in chapel that this discipleship group was open to any students who were willing to commit themselves to purchase their own Bible study materials, faithfully attend the weekly meetings, and complete all the weekly assignments. We made it clear that this was an optional activity which would offer no academic credit. We had ten students who indicated their desire to join the group and we stayed together for over two years meeting weekly on Sunday evenings in our home as we went through all six books of the Navigator's "2:7 Discipleship Series". None of the students dropped out.

A second personal example I can share was leading a group of students through some Bible study material at another Bible college we taught at later

on. At the time I was the faculty games advisor and my responsibility was to provide guidance and assistance to the captains of the various sports teams at the college. I would occasionally meet with these captains to discuss upcoming competitions with other colleges. One day I decided to ask these students if they would be interested in doing some Bible study together on a regular basis. They all agreed to do that, so we found a time (6:30 – 7:45 AM on Thursdays) when we could meet weekly in my office at the college. This study continued for the entire academic year. This time I used some Navigator Bible study material called “Growing in Discipleship” which is published in Kenya so it is relatively inexpensive. Students bought their own study books and were required to complete written assignments and memorize Bible verses every week. None of these students dropped out. Years later, I invited one of those sports captains (who was by that time a local church pastor) to be a guest speaker in one of my classes at the college. I was so encouraged to hear him begin his talk by saying that one of the main things he remembered about his four years as a student at this college was the weekly Bible study we had early on Thursday mornings with the sports captains. It was obvious that the Lord had greatly used that Bible study group in his life and in his growth toward spiritual maturity.

2. The Individual Approach

The individual approach is also very effective in making disciples. As we read through the Gospels, we certainly see Jesus working with His band of disciples as a group. But we also see numerous times where He discipled individuals. The most striking example of this is Jesus’ individual discipleship training with Simon Peter. In the Book of Acts, we see how many of the first century Christians followed Jesus’ example by discipling other believers. Two of the most obvious examples of these early disciple makers are Barnabas who discipled John Mark and Paul, who later discipled several other individuals including Silas, Titus, Onesimus, Philemon, and Timothy.

We can learn a lot about how to disciple new believers by looking at how Paul discipled this young man named Timothy. When we look closely at the New Testament writings we discover that Paul intentionally did quite a number of things including the following: he *wrote* to him (1 & 2 Timothy); he *prayed* for him (2 Tim. 1:3); he *loved* him (2 Tim. 1:4); he *encouraged* him (2 Tim. 1:5-7); he *instructed* him (2 Tim. 1:13); he *showed* him how a disciple lives (2 Tim. 3:10-11); he *exhorted* him to disciple others (2 Tim. 2:2); he *took* him with him in ministry (Acts 16:3-5); and he *sent* him to disciple other Christians (Phil. 2:19-24).

Based on Paul’s example, let me suggest eight general guidelines that can help us as we disciple young Christians that God brings into our lives.

- (1) Pray often for them.
- (2) Meet together on a regular basis for Bible study and prayer.
- (3) Do some things together just for fun and relaxation.

- (4) Be observant and respond appropriately to their needs.
- (5) Share your personal experiences.
- (6) Have a plan but be flexible.
- (7) Set a good example for them to follow.
- (8) Participate in ministry together.

But what *does* a mentor do when he meets one-on-one with an individual? I have found the following five things to be particularly helpful. First, we share *progress* since last meeting. In other words, we talk together about how things are going in our lives and how we did on our last assignment. Second, we study a *passage* of Scripture. This can be done by either using some published discipleship materials like the Navigators' *Growing in Discipleship* Bible study books or examining some specific verses in God's Word. Third, we discuss *problems* and challenges, that is, specific areas of need in our lives. Fourth, we have a time of *prayer* together about the needs we've shared with each other. Fifth, we make *plans* for our next meeting, such as the time, place, and the assignments. Someone once wisely said, "From a distance you may be able to impress people, but only up close are you able to have an impact upon their lives." We need to intentionally spend time with individuals if we are to have a lasting influence upon their lives.

So what does this one-on-one approach to discipleship look like in a Bible college setting here in Africa? Again let me share two personal examples. At one of the colleges I taught at in Kenya, each faculty member was assigned a fourth year student to supervise. Most of us would meet only occasionally with the students assigned to us. But I noticed that one of my colleagues met frequently with his student. So I followed his example and asked my student if he would be willing to meet weekly with me during a class period when both of us were free. He showed great interest in doing this and so we met together virtually every week for the rest of that year. We shared together, studied God's word together, and prayed together. It was one of the highlights for me as a teacher that year. This former student is now the national director of a strategic youth ministry in Kenya. We remain very close friends.

The other example comes from when I was teaching at the second college here in Kenya. I was praying about what individual I could mentor when the Lord impressed upon me one of the staff members of the college who showed a keen interest in studying God's word. One day I asked this staff member if he'd like to get together regularly to share, study, and pray together with me. He was quite eager to do so and we developed a very close friendship which exists to this day. He is now a faculty member at the college. This Timothy is now a Paul!

Investing Our Lives in Things of Eternal Value

What kind of legacy will you and I leave behind when the Lord calls us home? In his book, *Eternal Impact*, Phil Downer writes, "At the end of my

life... I want to leave a legacy of trained, active spiritual soldiers of the cross, who will stand in the gap for the Lord Jesus Christ, winning and discipling others long after I'm gone."⁴

Have you ever thought about the fact that our lives are like money? We can either spend our money or we can invest it. The same is true with our lives. We can either spend our lives on trivial pursuits (e.g. accumulating more possessions and seeking to live a life of pleasure), or we can invest them in things of eternal value (e.g. helping people come to know Christ and helping them grow spiritually). I don't know about you, but I want to invest my life wisely so that when I come to the end of it I can say like William Borden did - "No reserve. No retreat. No regrets." William Borden was a Christian missionary who invested his twenty-five year life wisely. How about *you*? Are *you* investing *your* life wisely? Are *you* a disciple-making teacher?

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