



DiscipleShift

5 Shifts We Can Make to Be Better at Discipleship

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How can we help churches be more effective at making and releasing disciples?

Over the next eight months, Exponential will provide answers to that question in diverse ways, including 35-plus free eBooks focused on discipleship and the Exponential 2013 conference oriented around the theme DiscipleShift. “With this conversation, we want to offer biblical solutions and look at five shifts churches can make to build on their passion for seeing their people on mission for Jesus,” says Exponential Futurist Todd Wilson.

To that end, the **2013 Exponential conference** theme DiscipleShift will explore in-depth what it means to be a disciple and how we can continue to grow and get better at engaging people with the mission of Jesus. Each of the five Main Sessions at Exponential 2013 will focus on one of these five shifts.

DiscipleShift also serves as the title of the conference’s anchor book by **Real Life Ministries** Founding Pastor Jim Putman (with Robert Coleman and Bob Harrington). Putman has led the church he founded in 1988 to raise up seven autonomous churches from their small groups. Out of a church of almost 8,000 people (in a community of 110,000), 75 percent of Real Life attendees participate in a small group. Additionally, beginning in September the Exponential Resource Series will offer **more than 35 free eBooks** (one a week) by national leaders, each contributing their insights and experience to the discipleship conversation.

Based on his experience, Putman has identified five paradigm shifts churches can make to become better at accomplishing the mission of the church. We asked him and Exponential President Dave Ferguson, who also leads **New Thing** and **Community Christian Church**, to help unpack each shift and its potential impact.

5 Crucial Disciples-Making Shifts



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Shift 1: From Reaching to Making

The first paradigm shift moves churches from defining ourselves by what we do to what we actually accomplish, Putman says. “We need to shift our focus from reaching people with the Gospel in an effort to convert them, to making disciples.”

The end goal is not that a person “accepts Christ” or prays a prayer or comes to church but rather that he grows spiritually, becoming more like Christ.

Making this shift requires us to agree on the definition of what a mature disciple is who Ferguson says is “apprenticing in the ways of Jesus.”

“As humans we know what a mature person ends up looking like and doing. What does a mature disciple look like then?” Putman asks, adding that often church leaders don’t define it for their people, which in turn gives each person carte blanche to come up with his or her own definition.

“This is a real problem if we are going to be a team that works together to complete the mission of Christ. We need to ask the question together as a body. If that definition doesn’t end up looking like one who is following Jesus, being changed by Jesus, and is committed to the mission of Jesus, then we have a definition with holes in it.”

Ferguson points out that part of the reason for the confusion over the definition results because church leaders themselves aren’t clear on what the mission is. “If we’re not crystal clear on what the mission is, we’re probably not clear on what it means to be missional. If that’s the case, it’s kind of hard to apprentice in the ways of Jesus if you’re not sure what Jesus is doing.”

Shift 2: From Teaching to Modeling

This second shift involves an inward look at how transparency and genuine discipleship is produced and modeled from the top down. This shift calls for leaders to change their focus from preaching/teaching (informing) to modeling and coaching (equipping). Too many church leaders today equate discipleship with imparting knowledge. This shift to coaching emphasizes the ministry of “equipping” (based on Eph. 4:11-13). Instead of primarily



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viewing themselves as a CEO, or even a teacher, senior pastors view themselves as a player-coach who equips (or coaches) others for ministry to ultimately grow the Kingdom.

Putman points out that Jesus disciplined people in relationship, not in preaching to thousands of people. ‘I used to be a teacher and coach,’ he says. “Teachers know that the larger the classroom, the more you’re forced to lecture and the less learning. Why is it that every good teacher would hate what every pastor thinks they want?”

Ferguson agrees, adding that the job of leadership is not to just get up on Sunday and talk about following Jesus. “I have to be apprenticed in the ways of Jesus and bring people alongside me and apprentice them in the same way. That’s how you get people who are on mission.”

In our current church model, Putman observes, it would appear the pastor’s role is to gather a crowd and be a paid performer. But Jesus’ life and leadership didn’t reflect that. “He coached and equipped people to release an army on a community,” he says. “He didn’t focus on gathering a crowd out of the community alone but rather releasing a crowd of disciples who can make disciples. Think about it. Jesus essentially said to the disciples, ‘You don’t need me to physically be here, walking with you. I’ve equipped you with what you need to be a disciple and make disciples in your homes and neighborhoods.’”

Shift 3: From Attending to Participating

This third shift challenges leaders to shift their mindset from discipleship as a program in their church that people attend to discipleship as the center and purpose of everything the church is and does, Putman explains, adding that leaders must let people know that discipleship is dependent on participating in the endless process of following Christ.

Ferguson simplifies things: “We start to transition our thinking from discipleship as a class or program we attend on the weekend or one night a week to something every believer actively participates in Monday through Sunday.”

Shift 4: From Connecting to Transforming

This shift is a call for churches to move their paradigms from activity-based to relationship-based. Beyond just classes and sermons, discipleship must be based on friendship and



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time together. To cultivate the kind of disciples Jesus did, we have to shift our paradigm from activity and surface connections to deep, accountable relationships.

Putman also refers to this shift as the “alignment” piece: Everything in a church must be shifted to divert the focus from activity and align it with relationships (for discipleship). A church’s primary mission is always discipleship, cultivated in a relationship-driven environment. The end goal of this shift, he says, is to create relational spaces, like Jesus did, where people help each other to trust and follow Him.

“In Acts 2, you see that the early church lived in relationship and in that relationship they were devoted to the apostles’ teaching, to breaking bread and fellowship—to caring for the hurting—even being willing to sell what they had and give it away. Jesus taught them to do all of these things.”

But today, many churches neglect to show people what it looks like to love like Jesus loved, he says. Instead, they were attracted to the church, handed a Bible and told to come back the next week.

“And that doesn’t work because Jesus didn’t do it that way. He disciplined the 12 in relationship.”

Ferguson adds, “It’s not enough to be in a holy huddle. I’ve had long conversations about the fact that it’s not enough to get people into a small group. A small group community was designed to also implement and live out the mission of Jesus.”

Ferguson’s Community Christian Church offers a tangible example of what that looks like in a small group context. After going through the message series “Discover Your Mission Now,” church leadership challenged every small group to write a mission statement and invited each individual on stage to be anointed and commissioned. As of last January, 73 percent of the church’s small groups (about 75 percent of all church attendees participate in a small group) had been commissioned.

“We’re really hoping to see 100 percent this year,” Ferguson says.



Shift 5: From Attracting to Deploying

The final shift helps churches define, articulate and implement a new scorecard for success that celebrates and places more emphasis on the release of an army of ministers and priests into a lost and hurting world than on how many people we attract.

Putman offers a list of telling questions for church leaders:

- What is success to me?
- What is success to our leaders?
- How did they learn that definition?
- What are we celebrating?
- What do people in our churches aspire to?

“If we’re honest, we know we’re celebrating many of the wrong things,” he says. “Or we’re celebrating just some of the right things so our people are aspiring to, especially our young leaders, a church with thousands of people. I’m all for numbers of converts, but those aren’t the right numbers alone. We should be counting and asking the question, *how many disciples have I made who can make disciples without me?*”

“I love how Rob Wegner [pastor of life mission for Granger Community Church] talks about mission for Granger,” Ferguson says. “They want to be seen as an airport. Nobody goes to an airport to hang out there; you come to an airport because you’re going someplace. That’s how our churches should be, too. We’re not just attracting people to hold you here. We’re sending you somewhere because God’s on the move and He’s sending you somewhere.”

It’s this final shift that Ferguson references as he thinks back to Community Christian’s beginnings and what he’d do differently in hindsight to release disciples. It was an “aha” moment for him and other leaders three years ago.

“I think we’ve done a good job of developing and deploying leaders,” he says. “The part that I think we didn’t do as good a job with has been training and deploying the individuals, not just the leaders. If you lead a group of 10 of any kind in our church, you’re a leader. We



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have high expectations but a low bar on leadership, so about 20 percent of our church we consider leaders. But there's the 80 percent that we need to include in the same intentional processes we use to develop leaders. We were really good at discipling people once they become apprentice leaders. The key is doing both things. I also would've done a better job—like we're doing now (NewThing has partnered with **Forge America**)—of deploying small missional groups and really putting a metric on that.”

Missional people + Multiplying churches = Missional movement

The collective impact of each of these paradigm shifts leads to developing people who are on mission, a key factor in the church as movement, say both leaders. Ferguson explains why discipleship is integral to a reproducing movement of disciples by offering a simple equation: Missional people + Multiplying churches = Missional movement.

“If the way to accomplish the mission of Jesus is through movement—we see this in Acts—and movement is generated by having both missional people and multiplication, then we have to focus on both components,” Ferguson says. “I think for some time now Exponential has championed the multiplication of churches—and I'm grateful to be a part of it. But if what you're reproducing isn't something that's going to bring about change, then you're really getting nowhere. So missional people—apprenticed in the ways of Jesus—are a non-negotiable piece to making this equation work.”

How church leaders get every person engaged with and excited about living out Jesus' mission is at the crux of the discipleship conversation that Exponential is championing and helping to shape.

“Biblically, discipleship is a non-negotiable part of Christ's mission,” Putman asserts. “In Christ's teaching, as well as throughout the epistles, we are consistently instructed to proclaim, baptize and teach—all toward the end of making lifelong, die-hard disciples of Jesus Christ who obey His commands. This type of discipleship needs to become the filter for everything we do in church.

“We want people to say, ‘It's my mission to make disciples,’ rather than, ‘Our church's mission is...’ It's that idea of ‘This is who I am; it's what I believe in.’ And that happens through relationship. You can't give someone else what you haven't owned.”