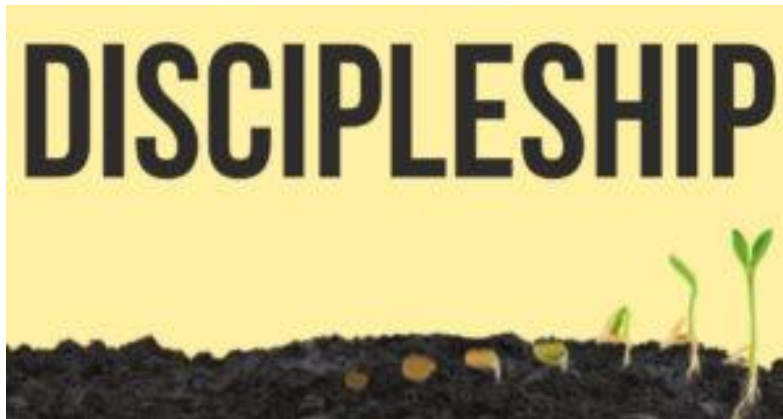


The State of

TRANSFORMATIONAL



in New England

by

The Cecil B. Day Foundation, Inc.

Update December 2022

The State of Transformational Discipleship in New England – Update December 2022

Background

In December 2018, The Cecil B. Day Foundation published its findings from a survey of New England evangelical ministries exhibiting healthy disciple-making cultures. We had already established from earlier research that thriving New England churches were focused on developing whole-life discipleship approaches for their members, and they tended to have multiple generations of disciple-makers in their congregations. In our study, the process for assessing effectiveness included the following steps:

1. During our scheduled visits with churches and ministries, we informed them of our desire to examine disciple-making strategies looking for **intentional, effective methods**. Although there are many varieties of disciple-making, we were especially interested in looking for strategies that were **biblically rich**, involve some aspects of **apprenticeship/mentoring**, and occur over a **significant time period**.
2. We gathered content that could be recommended to churches and ministries not yet intentional in their discipleship strategies.
3. We discovered and consulted with those who have contributed significantly to the discussion of disciple-making.
4. We prepared our findings in a report called **Transformational Discipleship** to be distributed where helpful.

Observations from the survey noted that **a clear definition of discipleship was somewhat difficult to determine**, although most thriving disciple-making ministries did a good job of articulating an understanding of the Great Commission's purpose and mission as a driving force behind their disciple-making efforts. Our observations were distilled into nine "best practice" categories which are detailed in the earlier report but are listed here as well.

1. Biblical foundation
2. Trained leadership in disciple-making

3. Pathway or journey approach
4. Roadmaps for the journey
5. Small group implementation
6. Highly relational
7. Consistency
8. Reproduction
9. Tracking and measuring effectiveness

In the intervening four years since the earlier survey, the occurrence of a world-wide pandemic has disrupted nearly every form of religious gathering across all denominations. Organizations with multiple-year strategic plans were suddenly faced with forced adjustments and postponements imposed by federal, state, and local authorities. This had a profound effect on disciple-making. Added to all of this was the resurgence of racial tension in the “Black Lives Matter” movement, particularly in more urban and suburban areas, and the rise of political polarization both nationally and within the evangelical church. Consequently, pastors and leaders have felt more occupational stress than ever before resulting in early retirement, resignations, and burnout. Barna reported in March 2022 (<https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/>) that 42 percent of pastors have considered quitting full-time ministry.

Yet, amid this disruption, disciple-making activities have been occurring at levels not seen for decades. This report will attempt to describe the intentional efforts and activities contributing to a growing disciple-making movement in New England. Local churches, denominations, campus ministries, youth ministries and other groups have seen intentional disciple-making flourish. More disciple-making resources exist today than ever before with books, webinars, conferences, videos, etc. Unquestionably, a revived and renewed focus on discipleship is happening across much of New England.

Still the weakest area for disciple-making to flourish seems to be at the local church level. Many churches are stuck in the old paradigm that “all things Christian” done in the church constitute discipleship. Yet the last few decades have shown this is not true as Christianity’s waning influence continues, even in Christian homes. Major shifts in the ways disciples are cultivated must take place, and those ministries seeing

active, reproducing disciples understand this necessity. One of the emerging tenets of effective disciple-making is that is **highly relational** – most often occurring in the smallest of settings rather than in the classroom. **The best disciple-making appears to occur with the presence of a competent teacher and a willing learner in an ever-deepening relationship.** The method Jesus used of **the Master with a limited number of follower/learners continues to produce whole-life disciples.**

Relationships are built over time through small disciple-making groups where the levels of transparency and intimacy are cultivated. Consequently, those ministries stressing intentional disciple-making through small groups are seeing the best results.

Surprisingly, with the pandemic forcing the closure of the large crowds for a season, those ministries pivoting to small group gatherings saw disciple-making increase.

New Efforts

With paradigm shifts, some level of guidance is helpful. Instruction is needed especially in ministries where staffing is thin and new ideas may seem threatening. In the past few years, **the emergence of discipleship practitioners who assess, teach, coach and provide resources has helped accelerate the disciple-making movement in New England.** Organizations like *Vision Partners, Exponent Group, 3DM, and Disciple-Makers Network*, have contributed much to bringing about the importance of Great Commission ministry at the local church level. *The Evangelical Network of New England (E-Net)* has hosted several disciple-making training sessions with presentations from disciple-makers. The ideas shared at a roundtable setting are designed to help leaders adopt and practice strategies not previously tried. Each of these disciple-making ministries stresses the importance of collaboration. Much of the success in advancing the disciple-making mission is the result of churches and ministries working together to increase the awareness of the Great Commission as their primary mission.

Vision New England (visionnewengland.org) began to spotlight disciple-making in 2021 with its Church in Action podcasts and video presentations featuring disciple-makers throughout New England in a variety of geographic and demographic contexts. President Charles Galda tells the exciting stories of watching people coming to faith and

continuing along the pathway of a disciple. These podcasts are an effective tool for demonstrating how everyone can be a disciple-maker, and *Vision New England* has done a superb job.

Vision New England has also convened a Discipleship Leaders cohort from across New England meeting every other month to discuss, develop, and hone their skills at leading disciple-making movements in their local context. Working with well-known disciple-making teachers such as Gordon and Gail MacDonald, Pastor Ray Hammond and others provide a wealth of proven strategies and encouragement. The feedback from the cohort's participants has been outstanding.

Vision Partners (framingthefuture.church) works with local churches desiring to make a culture shift from a “business as usual” approach to a vibrant whole-life disciple-making strategy over a period of 3 or more years. Jarrod Spaulding and Kim Richardson utilize a consultative approach, engaging with the church's leadership and bringing them through instruction, practice and coaching to produce lasting shifts. Several of the local churches they have worked with have now developed effective rhythms for disciple-making that had not occurred in many years.

Feedback from church leaders engaging with *Vision Partners* has been positive as they are able to fix their gaze on a future of disciple-making rather than “putting out fires” as one pastor phrased it. In the Great Commission, Jesus knew His followers would need to “go” and be busy about the business of ministry, but He was emphatic that as they went, they needed **to make disciples**, baptizing and teaching them to obey His commands. *Vision Partners* has done well in training to this end.

Exponent Group (exponentgroup.org) has a similar approach but brings technology into the process with excellent tools for online learning and a scorecard tracking process. Under the leadership of Joe Reed, resources such as coaching are also provided by trained discipleship coaches. *Exponent Group* partners with other disciple-making organizations to keep the mission of disciple-making in the forefront of the churches they work with throughout the region.

Exponent Group has seen multiple-generation discipleship happening within their family of disciple-makers. Beginning with 52 trained disciples, they have seen 300 new disciples reached and engaged in a more vibrant personal growth track.

3DM Movements (3dmovements.com) has formed Learning Communities in New England with local church leaders gathering in huddles for a highly interactive approach to disciple-making stressing the importance of building relationships with unbelievers. Under the direction of Gina Mueller, *3DM* appears with other disciple-making practitioners in a variety of venues seeking to keep disciple-making the number one priority of mission.

Gordon-Conwell Seminary (gordonconwell.edu) has placed increased attention on disciple-making. With the launch of the **Discipleship Experience** initiative, stressing the importance of discipleship among students who may never been disciplined has become a critical focus. Conferences and workshops sponsored by the seminary have brought increased attention to disciple-making. Both the President and Academic Dean have indicated their intentions to make discipleship a key focus at the seminary in the coming years.

Disciple-Makers Network (disciplemakersnetwork.org) led by Ray Bandi has developed a six-part training manual for disciple-makers serious about fulfilling the Great Commission. Its goal is to help local churches embrace the need for a culture shift. After several years of training and refining their offering, Disciple-Makers Network is seeing significant results.

A state-wide effort to unite disciple-makers is occurring in New Hampshire to see a community of disciple-making practitioners form with the intention of every NH region being able to introduce discipleship resources among churches and ministries. Dick Kiernan of *Come Follow Me* ministry (comefollowmenh.org) is the organizer. This may be the beginning of a New England-wide effort in the future!

Efforts on the national level have brought disciple-making resources into the hands of leaders, often at little or no charge. **Discipleship.org**, **Justin Gravitt**, **Pete Scazzero**, and many others offer podcasts, conferences, books, and blogs that address many of the challenges likely to confront leaders attempting to shift the culture of the church. It's

likely that more disciple-making resources are available today than at any other time in in recent memory!

Coaching

Disciple-making practitioners and ministry leaders with a disciple-making focus have indicated that **a hindering factor to scaling their influence and growing their organizations is the lack of trained coaches.** The acceleration of disciple-making movements happens when an abundance of like-minded pastors/leaders get together and provide mutual support, encouragement and share lessons learned under the guidance of an effective coach. Presently, the pool of qualified coaches is smaller than the need, according to many leaders. To help remedy this, a plan for training more coaches is underway utilizing the expertise of Dr. Kevin Lawson, an experienced teacher, trainer, and author. The hopeful outcome will be a larger group of qualified coaches able to assist ministries desiring to train more leaders.

Next-Generation Discipleship

In 2018, the Pinetops Foundation produced a report called ***The Great Opportunity***. The initial purpose of their research was to interview Christian leaders and ask if they could help the church become more fruitful over the next 30 years, what would they do? With many polling organizations reporting the drastic drop in religious interest, particularly among Millennials and Gen Z, the need seemed clear. We need to bring the Gospel to the youth, or the American Church may not survive. From page 5 of their report:

As a result of months of research, we now think we are at a pivotal moment in the life of the American church. What we found was the largest missions opportunity ever in American history, and if we move quickly, we can help introduce tens of millions of young people to Jesus over the next 30 years.

Desiring to act on the findings of this research, a concentrated effort is being made to engage Gen Z with disciple-making. Several new youth movements have risen, and many existing youth ministries are narrowing their focus on next-gen discipleship.

HowtoLife Movement, Fuller Youth Institute, Young Life, Youth for Christ, Luis Palau Ministries, Word of Life, and many others are intensely focusing on Gen Z both nationally as well as with targeted involvement in New England. In October 2021, the first New England Gen Z Summit was launched in Worcester, MA under the leadership of Kyler Barr with youth leader/influencers from a dozen or more youth ministries for the purpose of finding ways to build a bridge between Gen Z and the local church. The Summit is ongoing with leadership passionate about fulfilling their mission. Early results are showing a hunger for the Gospel among youth that may have either left Church or never had exposure to it. Their interest is more often in hearing about Jesus and less about joining organized religious institutions. There is certainly much more work to be done before we see larger numbers of the younger generations worshipping within the walls of the organized church. However, optimism among youth leaders and Gen Z influencers is high. Several regional prayer gatherings have brought together teens from around New England passionate about prayer for their generation.

Next-generation discipleship must be emphasized and made a high priority for the foreseeable future.

Wisdom From Disciple-Making Leaders

As we encounter disciple-making at all levels of ministry, some of the findings congruent with disciple-making cultures emerge as necessary principles that can't be ignored. This section will capture some of this wisdom from those who have been engaged in intentional whole-life disciple-making for years.

1. **Shifting from what has been called the church growth mindset to a disciple-making mindset must begin with the senior/lead pastor.** If the leader who is most visible as the primary communicator to the church, whether at the gathered worship service or through online media, has not made discipleship a priority, the church is not likely to become a disciple-making church.
2. **Knowing where the church is at regarding its disciple-making efforts is critical.** Many **assessment tools** exist to help evaluate effectiveness. They provide a baseline from which progress can be measured. Currently, these

assessments show that 95% of American churches do not have a disciple-making culture.

3. **Lasting discipleship happens most frequently in smaller discipleship-focused settings.** As it is highly relational, the more intimate the setting, the more fruitful the results. Classroom discipleship courses do well at transmitting information, but do not produce disciples. But not all small groups are disciple-making groups. Many churches have had small groups operating for years for the purpose of fellowship, encouragement, and assimilation into the larger body of believers. Yet, for true discipleship to occur, there must be a high level of intentionality in engaging with practices that help believers personally become conformed to the image of Christ through the transformative power of the Holy Spirit.
4. **A discipleship pathway is critical for disciples to move from one stage of growth to the next.** The church should provide resources to help disciples advance in spiritual maturity with the understanding that we never arrive until we are in the presence of Jesus. The most effective churches in disciple-making are helping direct their members along an intentional pathway through clear communication from every platform – pulpit, newsletters, social media, signage, gatherings, and other forms of messaging.
5. **Beware of focusing more on the tools for disciple-making than on the goal.** Jesus’s command to “go and make disciples” had whole-life transformation in view, i.e., faithful followers who became more like Himself. The Apostle Paul used language such as “that I may know Him” and “I press toward the goal...” (Phil. 3). There is danger in performing practices to become good at them if the end goal is not in view. Becoming more Christlike in every aspect of life through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit is the purpose of whole-life discipleship.
6. **If the Bible is not the core curriculum for disciple-making, true discipleship will not happen.** Study guides and courses are helpful, but a disciple must become conversant with God’s Word if lasting spiritual growth is going to occur.
7. **Transitioning from traditional church culture to a disciple-making culture is a long process requiring patient and intentional leadership.** Leaders are

typically wired to see quick results as they implement strategies for change. Unfortunately, disciple-making is a life-long process requiring continuous effort. It's why the Church exists, so it must become what the church does. Leaders must accept and embrace this fact.

- 8. Incorporating prayer as an essential element for both the church and disciples being “trained”.** Learning to listen and hear the Holy Spirit is critical for developing one's walk with Jesus. As disciples gather and pray with each other, the transformative stories of spiritual formation are shared, and God's provision is manifested over time. Praying for God's leading and for His will to be accomplished is an important discipline for transformational disciple-making.

The Future

There are other disciple-making efforts going on in New England not mentioned in this report. Campus ministries, denominational efforts, and other para-church ministries have joined in focusing on disciple-making as a core value of what they offer.

Only God knows how effective these combined efforts will be. However, we have the confidence that obedience to the Great Commission is what Jesus has asked. The Church in New England has gone through decades of decline, although general populations have grown and changed drastically in their regional and demographic makeup. Churches seeing fruit in making disciples that reproduce have made the Great Commission the church's mission. Jesus said to “go and make disciples of all nations”. Where a culture of disciple-making occurs, reproducing fruit is the result.

As we watch church congregations transform, we see different rates of change. On one hand, church planters who establish the mission of making disciples early in their lifecycle seem to make disciples that flourish. On the other hand, in the case of the pastor of a more traditional church encumbered with heavy organizational constraints and mission drift, the transition can be very slow – often 8-10 years or more. Although this may sound discouraging, bringing a church back to its founding principles, which is almost always associated in some way with the Great Commission, is not only worthwhile, but pleasing to God. It is certainly worth the investment of time. The results

are not instant, but rather steady over time as people become acclimated to the ways of disciple-making.

As previously mentioned, the resources, the support, the coaching, are all available to assist a leader wanting to make the shift. But there are no “silver bullets”. Like every goal worth striving for, whole-hearted commitment is key. Results can be slow and pushback from resistant New Englanders can be discouraging. But remember the words of Jesus in Luke 9:62, *“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.”* Like a good diet plan, you won’t get results unless you commit to it for a long time. This is contrary to how most leaders operate. As mentioned earlier, they like to see quick results from their actions. Unfortunately, with disciple-making this is not the case. Even Jesus took three and a half years working with His disciples, and many never got it fully until long after He ascended to heaven.

New England is poised for a true disciple-making movement if the combined collaborative efforts of so many will continue. Let’s pray this will be the case. The results may be a true revival in our day.