

Birth of the Disciplers' Model

The Disciplers' Model grew out of my struggles in teaching. Long before entering formal studies in education ministry at Southwestern seminary, I wrestled with common problems associated with teaching Sunday School. Inattention, sporadic attendance, and general disinterest were the prevalent traits of my learners during those early years.

BEFORE SEMINARY

During the three years before entering seminary I taught a Sunday School class of deaf college students. My wife and I worked as dormitory counselors at Gallaudet College, Washington, D.C. and directed the deaf ministry at Columbia Baptist Church (SBC) in nearby Falls Church, Virginia. These young adults were bright and enthusiastic, but they lacked experience with the Bible and the language of the church.

Lives in a Blood Pump?

One day I was talking with several students about salvation. "What do you mean by 'saved'," one of them asked. I tried to explain the term in words I had learned in Sunday School and Church Training. "It means to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior." *What do you mean 'accept Jesus'?* one asked.

Hmmm. "Well, it means to invite Jesus into

your heart." More puzzled looks. *How can Jesus live in my heart? Is He that small? How can He live inside a muscle that pumps blood?*

Hmmm. "Well, it means to let Jesus guide your life." *How can He guide me if I can't see Him?*

Good questions. How do I answer them? After all, they had to move beyond simplistic answers to real understanding if they were to grow in the Lord.

Religious Code Words

The crux of my communication "problem" was that I grew up, physically and spiritually, in a Christian environment. I grew up in a Christian home. I was saved on Easter Sunday morning, 1954, at the First Baptist Church of Rockville, Indiana. I gave all I knew of myself to all that I knew of the Lord at six years of age.

In 1956 my family moved to El Paso, Texas, where my mother and I joined the Trinity Baptist Church. Several men began visiting my Dad on Thursday nights. He was not a Christian at the time, and their informal but sincere witness made quite an impact on him. Within the year he made his commitment to Christ and I was able to see --even at the age of 8-- what a change could come when one surrendered his life to Christ. At age fourteen, I surrendered to full time Chris-

tian service.

My relationship with the Lord was real, but my *ability to explain* that relationship to my deaf listeners was limited. The religious code words expressed concepts of new life and relationships with the Lord and with other believers. At Church, “the faith” was proclaimed enthusiastically in the jargon of the saved, but it was rarely explained so a child could understand what all the words meant. This jargon still has deep meaning for me, but it communicates only to those who already know the lingo. The question haunted me: “How can I share the Gospel so that my students can grasp it? Relate themselves to it? Embrace it? Live it? Share it with others?”

From Code to Clear

I began to translate my beliefs and personal experiences into language that --by trial and error I found-- had meaning for my students. I formed new ways to express the truth of Christ and how the reality of His Presence helped me day by day. The reality had not changed. The truths were not compromised. But I was obsessed to find ways to explain what the truths meant to those who had yet to experience them.

As I analyzed my religious jargon and the problems it posed in witnessing, I began to ask myself other questions: *How much do I know about the learners who sit in my class? How much of my teaching do students carry with them back to their dorms? Why didn't they ask questions? Why did they seldom make comments, or share personal experiences?* Sunday after Sunday they looked to me --their **teacher** -- to tell them what they should believe. But by Monday they had forgotten most of what I'd worked so hard to tell them. *Oh, Rick, you teach much, and you teach well, but it all goes in*

one eye and out the other, one of them told me. There had to be a better way!

The Beginning of Change

I began to make conscious changes in the way I taught. I asked more questions. I began to use more time to discuss Bible concepts *with them* and less time lecturing *to them*. I learned that their responses to questions and their contribution to discussions revealed how well or poorly I had communicated. In the process, I also learned about experiences in their lives which distorted their understanding of God and His love. I listened for anger and frustration and cries for help. I listened for testimonies of joy and discovery.

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Sunday Bible study sessions took on new life. Over the weeks and months that followed, the Bible began to speak to these learners as it had spoken to me for years. I felt the growing expectation of learners as they gathered in the classroom on Sundays. Through assignments made and questions asked the week before, they had already learned. They had already received. They were ready to celebrate together what God had taught them through their Bible study

and personal experiences of the past week. Attendance increased in quantity and consistency. We grew from ten to twenty to thirty during the year. During that same year, 22 committed their lives to Christ and were baptized. Members became leaders and accepted positions of responsibility in the class. Lives were transformed through the study of God's Word. This was my first taste of **discipling** Sunday School.

DURING SEMINARY

In 1973, I entered Southwestern seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, to study education ministry. In November of that year I was called by a local Southern Baptist church to be Director of Deaf Ministries. The members of the deaf department were no less intelligent than the college students I had taught in Virginia, but they had less formal education and less facility with English. While at Gallaudet College, my sign language skills had been limited to a simplified English syntax. But the people in Irving used American Sign Language (ASL), the language of the deaf community in America. It is rich in its ability to express ideas, feelings, and actions, but it is nonetheless a language in its own right. It is no more like English than is German or Russian.

More Problems to Solve

The principles I had begun learning in Virginia entered a second stage of development in Texas -- still riveted by a single, crucial question: *"How can I present biblical Truth in a way that my learners can understand, accept, and live out in their world?"* Some of the problems I saw in our adult class included these:

Teaching = Talking?

The teacher talked about the Bible (and anything else she might have read that week), but she gave no opportunity for the learners to respond or question what she said.

Maintain Interest?

The teacher seldom gained, and rarely maintained, the interest of her learners. Attendance was motivated primarily by free coffee and doughnuts and annual attendance contests.

Focus on Teacher or Learners?

The teacher lectured at length every week about her own interests and problems. The members contributed nothing to the session but their presence. The teacher was merely a performer; the learners spectators.

Learners' Experiences Important?

Members were not invited to participate in the class, nor were they asked about their own views, feelings, or experiences. There was a lot of hidden talk in the back of the room. But none of it related to the Bible study!

One-way Communication?

The teacher simply stood before the class and talked through what she had prepared to say. She did not help her learners wrestle with the implications of the Bible for real living.

Sit Still While I Instill?

Members were inhibited. They had been taught not to interrupt the teacher. Learner needs and hurts remained undiscovered and unmet. They came lonely and left lonely. Their lives were untouched by the Bible lessons.

Mechanical Routine?

Sessions were routine and mechanical. There was little evidence of spiritual growth in the members. To these learners, Bible study was a religious ritual that had little to do with how one lives from day to day. It was something to fill the time until the next attendance contest.

Concern for Producing Leaders?

There were few leaders in the group. The majority were content to sit back and let the few do the work. Most members had little or no interest in serving the Lord.

Potential Exposed

While considering how to overcome the problems in our Bible study program, I began to find answers through my studies at Southwestern seminary. I studied educational psychology, principles of teaching and educational philosophy. Clusters of ideas for effective Christian teaching began to develop from the mix of seminary courses and church discoveries. Through months and into years, I was exposed to potential solutions to the problems that continued to hinder my teaching. During my third year in seminary I witnessed a radical approach to classroom teaching that changed me forever. The two-day experience was a furnace that fused education principles learned in seminary with the practical teaching approaches tested with the deaf youth and adults in Irving. The result: the basic elements of the Disciplers' Model.

Potential Observed

The experience began as a simple visit with my Dad in Lawton, Oklahoma. He was teaching a course for the Army on a newly devel-

oped radar system. I knew he had an excellent reputation as a platform instructor, so I expected to observe a good model of classroom teaching. But I was not quite prepared for the impact that came.

Early Monday morning, I watched as the men shuffled into class. Some yawned from lack of sleep. Some bragged of their misadventures of the night before. Others moved away from the noise and bright lights to nurse their hangovers. Coffee was consumed. Seats were begrudgingly taken as Dad stepped up on the raised platform at the front of the room.

He held the civilian rank equivalent of full Colonel, but his demeanor reflected a person who saw himself more as a guide, or advisor, to these men he was charged with teaching. He resisted the temptation to "pull rank" to manipulate his enlisted students.

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He walked to the blackboard and drew a simple diagram that they had used the week before. He turned to the class and said, rather offhandedly, "Now fellahs, there's something wrong with this diagram. We

went over the components and terminology of the system last week. Let's see if we can find the problem. Do any of you have an idea about what's wrong here?" There was silence for a time. A low mumble began on the other side of the room as three soldiers collaborated. Several opened their manuals to check relevant specifications. A question was asked, and Dad provided the requested information. Slowly, other members of the class began to ask questions and make observations based on previous lectures and assignments. Within twenty minutes the class was huddled together in groups of various sizes, reviewing notes and checking manuals.

Additional problems were introduced and alternative solutions developed. Dad moved from group to group, teaching new material, questioning solutions, encouraging comments, and answering arguments. Before I knew it, two hours had passed and it was time for a coffee break. The soldiers stretched their legs, got some more coffee, and went back to work on the problem before break time was officially over. I thought, "If this kind of interest can be generated in Army enlisted men studying the tedious details of radar maintenance, how much more should we be able to generate interest in Christians studying the Book of Life?"

Potential Realized

When I returned home, I began to put together a special Bible study class. The class would be based on the Disciplers' elements that had been dancing around my mind. I wanted to see if I could teach a Bible class in a way that eliminated the problems I had observed in Sunday School. I wanted the kind of enthusiastic learning I had seen in my Dad's Army classroom to happen in my

Bible study class.

The "test class" was held on Wednesday evenings. I took a low key approach to publicizing the new class -- I did not aggressively promote it or go out of my way to "encourage" people to attend. No refreshments were provided. The only incentive for participating in the class was "better understanding of the Bible." Out of a Sunday morning attendance of 20-25 deaf adults, we had a Wednesday night group of 5-10. I lectured "conversationally," asking questions often and requiring the participants to dig out the answers. I made assignments every week to encourage individual preparation. In seven months, I noted the following trends.

We Let the Bible Speak

The class used the Bible as its text. We did not merely talk about the Bible, but discussed God's Word and its relevance to our lives. We let the Bible speak.

Interest Based on Relevance to Life

Interest in the class remained high during the entire course of study. Attendance was more stable than in our Sunday School. Learners in the class were consistently enthusiastic because they saw for themselves the relevance of the Bible to their own daily problems and decisions.

Initiative Improved

At first, class members waited for me to explain the Bible to them. I had difficulty getting them to answer questions or search for answers in the Bible. As time passed, however, they became less dependent on me and searched the scriptures more for themselves.

Mutual Respect Grew

They learned to respect one another's opinions and feelings. Put-downs and arguments

among members decreased. Self-worth grew as problems were shared with trusted members in the group. Solutions were offered and discussed.

Result: Changed Lives.

Learners applied both heart and mind to their Bible study. They discovered new ways to express the meaning of the Bible to their friends at school and work. They applied its Truth in their daily lives. Lifestyles began to change for the better.

Trust Increased

Class members shared more deeply with one another, after only a month or so, than I had seen in two and a half years prior to the class. Trust level among members increased.

Insight into Learner Needs

I learned so much more about each member of the class in these seven months than I had learned in the previous three years. I learned about their level of Bible knowledge, spiritual maturity, likes and dislikes, and so on. With this information, I taught more effectively.

Confidence Improved

Members became more confident in their own ability to serve. Church Training and Sunday School efforts were made stronger because of the involvement of these Wednesday nighters.

Willingness to Serve Increased.

The desire of learners to do something for the Lord increased as they discovered their gifts and gained personal confidence. They began to minister to friends and acquaintances. Numerical growth increased as members engaged in personal ministry instead of

games and gimmicks.

SINCE SEMINARY

The experiment was held on Wednesday nights, but its results have been applied in regular Sunday School programs ever since. I have served several churches as minister of education: five years as a full-time minister, and then eight years as interim minister of education in three Fort Worth area churches. I have led dozens of Sunday School workshops and conferences across the Convention. I have talked with scores of teachers who struggle with the same frustrations I had: disinterest, mechanical teaching, passive learners, and little apparent growth in the Lord.

As a seminary professor, I talk with students every semester who are ready to give up on Sunday School as an obsolete and unworkable organization -- until they get a vision for the ministry that is possible through a discipling approach to Bible study.

The principles that began in a deaf college Sunday School class in 1971, that developed through Master's and Doctoral degrees in education, that were molded through years of teaching deaf adults, have since been applied in teacher training seminars in scores of churches and seminary classrooms. The response has been strong and overwhelmingly positive.

You can see similar results in your Sunday School ministry, but it may require fundamental changes in the way your teachers view their task. The required changes in teachers and leaders require time, patience, and consistent effort from the pastor or education minister.

The Disciplers' Handbook outlines just how to accomplish this task.



