

WHAT KIND OF DISCIPLES? WHAT KIND OF CHURCHES?

by Bob Moffitt

The Church on the Move! . . . Where is it Going?

God's Kingdom is expanding! Evangelical and Pentecostal church growth among Two-Thirds World peoples is on the march. That is truly good news, and I, for one, am excited. But, I am also concerned. Will the new disciples and the new churches born in these efforts reflect God's whole concern for the whole person?

Sadly, it seems that many of the new churches springing up are weak in training their people how to become followers of Jesus. Discipleship training, where it does exist, often emphasizes believers' vertical relationships with God—salvation, forgiveness of sins, Bible study, prayer, moral purity. Characteristically omitted are believers' horizontal responsibilities (loving their neighbors, serving their brothers and sisters, being salt and light, caring for widows and the afflicted, standing against injustice, building healthy families and communities). Similar imbalance is reflected by the churches themselves. The call to get right with God is strong, while dire physical and social needs of the community and its people are neglected.

The Church . . . and Profound Human Need

"But," you may say, "This is not the church's role. Christians must not lose their focus!" I ask you to consider that our Lord's strategy in reaching the unreached includes His concern for and ministry to people's physical and social needs—as well as their spiritual needs. Demographics tell us that it will not be many decades before one-quarter of the world's population will be urban poor. Many of these urban poor will live in inhuman, squalid conditions that would appall most Westerners.

In this context of profound human need, a ministry which does not address physical and social needs has several tragic consequences:

First, it dishonors God's holy name and His compassion for those who suffer physically and socially. God is unequivocal in His commands that His people reflect His concerns. Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25 powerfully reflect His regard for the physical and social arenas of life.

Secondly, Christians appear to care more about "making converts" than they do about the people who need conversion. When Dr. S. Benjamin was growing up in India, a missionary told him that it didn't matter so much if a man died of starvation as long as his soul was saved. Though it is ultimately true that the soul is more important than the body, that insensitive perspective left a lasting negative impact on Dr. Benjamin. Until his death in 1992, Dr. Benjamin, serving as General Secretary of the Association of Telugu Baptist Churches (the largest denominational group in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India), remained committed to leading the Telugu churches in spiritually and socially balanced ministries.

Thirdly, people who need the Gospel are turned away because the Gospel seems irrelevant to their felt needs. Chavannes Jeune, a Christian leader in Haiti, says that evangelicals in his country are often accused of preaching a gospel of resignation—resignation to the suffering and evil of this present life, while awaiting the good life of eternity. A similar belief is held in the Dominican Republic. One of the Dominican barrio churches with which Harvest works started a school for its

community. Several young political activists—unbelievers—approached the pastor and commented, "We didn't realize you Christians cared about people! Can we help?"

Fourthly, the local church is isolated from part of the battle which God intends His church to fight—as His principal agent of physical and social restoration. In Ephesians 3:10 Paul explains: "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms." And Romans 8:19 expresses, "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed." I believe these passages tell us that God intends to use the church to demonstrate and model the full and future expression of His reign. The present demonstration of the Kingdom of God occurs when God's people—individually and corporately—are faithfully following Jesus, obeying His commands. Obedience to Jesus, according to Scripture, includes loving and serving our neighbors, getting involved in issues of justice, and meeting physical and social needs.

The Ministering Disciple

At the individual level, disciples of Jesus should live a lifestyle that reflects the ministry of Jesus and His disciples, as described by Jesus Himself:

" . . . he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18, quoting Isaiah 61:1,2)

As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.
(Matthew 10:7-8)

Several years ago, I heard a police representative address a group of Denver businessmen. He described the work of a Mr. Mitchell, a local citizen who ministered sacrificially to Denver inner-city youth. He summarized: "If you ever want to know what Jesus Christ was like, you need to meet Bill Mitchell." An individual disciple, by definition, is one like Mr. Mitchell: He mirrors his Master to the world around him.

The Ministering Church

At the community level, the local church should look like an embassy of the Kingdom of God. Its people and programs should be such a compelling witness of Christ's loving concern for the spiritually, socially, and physically needy of the community that all who see it will stand in awe and say, "What a loving and great God the God of those people must be!" In the foreword of A Mandate for Good Works, author Dave Hagstrom quotes Aelius Aristides, a second-century emissary to the Emperor Hadrian. Observing Christians, Aristides wrote:

They love one another and they never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger they take him home and are happy as though he were a real brother; they don't consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Spirit in God.¹

This is the kind of witness that honors our Father. And I have seen God use it to bring about spiritual and social renewal in communities.

To the unbeliever in the barrio, churches seem to be full of "hallelujahs"—folks who are serious about life after death, but are not particularly interested in getting involved in community life. The church, he surmises, is simply a place where women and children gather on Sunday—and almost every evening—for long, loud services. Think of the difference if the church was also known as the place where the clinic is held. As the place where adults can learn to read. As the place where the day-care center is. As the place where seminars are held on critical community issues. As the place where hurting and needy people go to find love, help, and counsel.

YOU . . .

Are you called to a ministry of evangelism, discipleship, church planting? What kind of disciples will you make? Will they be partial disciples—concerned solely about people's vertical relationships with God? What kind of churches will you plant? Will they reflect only a part of God's intentions for our broken world, or will they reflect His whole concern for the whole person?

In I Corinthians 3:12-13 Paul reminds us that the quality of our work will be tested.

If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.

If we plant churches that are woefully lacking in the demonstration of God's intentions, how much of our work will survive God's test of quality? As we busy ourselves with "church growth," we need to be sure that our business is designed to produce local churches that will stand God's quality test.

Do you think that this concept of "wholistic" ministry is a bit on the idealistic side for local churches among the poor? I am happy to tell you that it is possible!

In our ministry we have watched local barrio churches catch visions of God's intentions for their communities and then begin to realize those visions—empowered by God's Spirit and using local resources. The impact of one small church in the Dominican Republic was so powerful that the entire community decided to rename itself—from a derogatory term to one that reflected a positive image of the community. And the community decided to advertise its new name atop the building where the church had started the community school. Not only does the community feel good about itself, but God has used the physical and social ministry of this church to draw community members to Himself.

Ideas to Start Your Thinking

Do you believe that God wants you to encourage others in wholistic discipleship and ministry? Here are some principles to get you started:

1. Disciple new believers in the theology and practice of good works from the beginning of their training. Good works or outreach to physical and social needs is not only for "mature" Christians.
2. Thoroughly ground the discipleship teaching on the bountiful and irrefutable biblical passages related to loving others. Unless new believers understand that Scripture commands discipleship in both faith and works, an enthusiastic commitment to balanced ministry will be difficult to sustain. New believers in a Mexico village learned that the Bible says to care for widows and orphans. Though poor themselves, they constructed small homes for the widows in their

community. They now have a thriving church, an evangelized village, and a consistent outreach to neighboring unreached villages. Their effectiveness began with an understanding of and obedience to Scripture.

3. Model, as a discipler, a life of balanced and integrated ministry. I recently spoke with a veteran missionary who realized that his disciples were not doing balanced ministry because he, their teacher, was not modeling that balance. He was so busy teaching that he had not taken time to minister to the physical and social needs of others.
4. Understand that church members' lifestyles need be consistent with the church's corporate ministry. Church programs should reflect what individuals and families already practice. If members' lives are inconsistent with the corporate ministry, that ministry can hardly be viewed as authentic—nor will it be effective. If church members practice balanced ministry only when involved with church programs, they will not likely alter their lifestyles. Instead, through vicarious association, participation in church programs will offer them an excuse for not incorporating horizontal ministry into their lives.
5. Seek a vision of God's intentions for the community. Pray. Read. Discuss the implications of balanced ministry from a biblical perspective. Survey community needs. Ask, "If Jesus were King in our community, what would it be like? What changes would He make physically, spiritually, socially?" Realize that this emerging vision will be dynamic, not static. As the church involves itself in the vision, God's intentions will become clearer. The goal is not for the church to achieve the vision in its totality. Rather, the church should help establish the parts of the vision to which Jesus has called it.
6. Give testimony that outreach efforts represent God's intentions for restoration. First, as ministry outreach activities are undertaken, communicate the reason for them—they are God's concern. Provide a Scriptural reference reflecting His concern. Secondly, pray diligently as you plan, execute, evaluate, and—especially—as you celebrate completion of the activity. As observers see Christians calling on God for direction and provision, it should be clear to them that the local church believes and behaves as if God is leading the project. Thirdly, the church should intentionally—privately and publicly—give God credit as the primary actor. Otherwise, credit often gets misdirected to the missionary, development worker, or agency which God used to provided the resources.
7. Use local resources—those God has already provided—before turning to outside agencies. God makes no exceptions—the poor, too, must regard His commands to share what He has entrusted to them. God delights in using meager resources which have been freely offered to Him. He demonstrates His power and His desire to bless all those who honor Him with obedience. Beware of affluent missionaries, relief and development workers, or short-term missions groups who behave as if the needy are too poor to provide help for themselves or each other. Unknowingly, they disempower the poor and rob them of the joy of seeing God bless their obedience—perhaps sharing the only "talent" they have. Refer to Matthew 25: 14-28.
8. Acquire experiences in small ministry activities which use local resources before turning to outside sources for larger projects. If large resources from the outside are brought into a local church or community before the church learns to depend on God and the local resources He has provided, then it is likely that the local church (1) will learn to believe that provisions for physical or social ministry must come from outside, (2) will establish ministry projects that are dependent on outside resources, and (3) will not learn to initiate ministry projects based

solely on local resources.

9. Network to learn about new strategies and resources for ministry. Before a church begins a project, see how other groups (Christian or not) are attacking similar problems. Find out where they located their resources. Look at several outreach models, then have your church leadership decide what would work best in your local church.
10. Develop an attitude of a servant, not a controller. The local church should be salt and light—an influence—in the community, not headquarters for an alternative theistic political system. The church can participate and even take leadership in physical and social committees and projects, but it should generally not attempt to secure control of the process.

Real Examples

Numerous ministry activities reflect God's concern for the needy. Such activities can easily be undertaken by the poor and their churches. To illustrate, I will give a few examples. All are based on real experiences.

1. Church members survey the community for widows without means of support. The church then offers to be an adoptive family, providing physical and emotional support. Individuals are available to cook, provide food, clean house, care for children.
2. The church starts its own child sponsorship program. Church leadership identifies a needy community child who cannot afford school. After determining the financial need, they match the child with sufficient members of the church who pledge the support needed for that child to attend school for one year.
3. The women of the church do an informal survey of items needed by people from the community—clothing, food, cookware, etc. The pastor tactfully announces the needs in church and gives members an opportunity to volunteer to meet the needs.
4. The church starts a soccer team and invites other local teams to play. Someone begins the games with prayer, thanking God for His concern for healthy bodies and good human relationships. The visiting team is invited to stay for refreshments and fellowship.
5. A survey is taken of skills available within the church, such as carpentry or sewing. Members sign up to volunteer their skills for a given period of time. The church coordinates skills and time resources with community needs.
6. Church members set aside one handful per day of a staple food (rice, beans, flour). At the end of the week, or when the container is full, it is taken to a more needy neighbor or brought to church to be distributed as an expression of Jesus' love.
7. Church members who can read volunteer to attend a local literacy program to learn to teach others to read. They return and offer reading classes for the community.
8. Church leaders meet with community leaders to explore how church members can contribute to community projects.
9. The church organizes a community-wide garbage clean-up project. The project begins with a mini-drama for the community, illustrating God's concern for

health and sanitation and showing the relationship between garbage and disease.

10. The church holds seminars on issues of interest and invites the community. Guest speakers may be invited, and members seek to build relationships with outsiders. Sample subjects: "How to Be a Good Husband," "How to Be a Good Wife," "How to Shop and Cook for Good Health," "Boy-Girl Relationships," "Sexually Transmitted Diseases."

In Conclusion . . .

Broken and hurting people desperately need to know the full scope of God's love. Individual Christians and local churches are the best—in many cases, the only—windows through which some people will learn of God's wonderful intentions for them. If Christians and local churches are not proclaiming and demonstrating God's whole concern for the whole person, much of His plan for the present expression of His Kingdom will be lost. In fact, much is already being lost in many Two-Thirds World communities—because of narrow approaches to discipleship and ministry.

When the needy people of the community in which you minister see God's love and intentions for them through the window of the local church you plant, will they be able to say, like Aristides: ". . .they never fail to help widows; . . .if they have something they give freely to the man who has nothing. . .they don't consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Spirit in God?" When a broken person looks through the window of your life or the life of one you have discipled, will he say: "If you want to know what Jesus Christ was like, you have got to meet _____?" Think! What an incredible impact for Christ's Kingdom if every disciple made and every new church planted—between now until the year 2000—had a testimony like this!

¹Dave Hagstrom, *A Mandate for Good Works* (Montana: Community Leadership and Development Inc., 1989), p. ix.

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