

Preview

"A fascinating look at  
Level 5 Churches."

—Todd Wilson, Co-Founder  
of Exponential



# 7 PRACTICES OF DISCIPLE MAKING CHURCHES

New Research on What Works  
in North America

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**BOBBY HARRINGTON  
AND JOSH HOWARD**

with Mason Eagle



This book captures something we desperately need to recover in the West: a church where disciple making moves from slogan to shared life, from program to patterned obedience.

**Alan Hirsch**, Author; Founder, Forge Missional Training Network and Movement Leaders Collective

Packed full of real-life case studies, and backed by research, Bobby and Josh have compiled a solid resource for churches and leaders who want to know how to do it themselves.

**Peyton Jones**, Author, *Discipology*

I've spent years walking alongside pastors and leadership teams who are faithful, exhausted, and quietly wondering why so much activity produces so little multiplication. This book names that tension with uncommon clarity—and then does something far more important: it shows a better way. Harrington, Howard, and Eagle don't offer another model to copy or program to implement. Instead, they surface the shared convictions and practices of churches where disciple making has become culture, not curriculum. Grounded in rigorous research and brought to life through real North American churches, this book functions as both a mirror and a map—challenging leaders to rethink their metrics while giving them practical, reproducible pathways forward. If you're serious about moving your church from addition to multiplication, this is not just a helpful resource; it's a necessary one.

**Todd Milby**, Founder & Managing Partner, Catapult

I've spent five decades planting churches and watching movements multiply across four continents. This book captures what I've seen work—not in theory, but in the messy reality of ordinary believers making disciples who make disciples.

**Ralph Moore**, Hope Chapel; Author, *Making Disciples*

In their latest book, *7 Practices of Disciple Making Churches*, Bobby Harrington and Josh Howard use in-depth data, cutting-edge analysis, and practical insight to show that each one of us can be part of a local church that creates not just converts, followers, or attendees—but true disciples of Christ. . . . Perhaps like me, you don't just want to be known as a preacher, presenter, or (God forbid) performer. You really want to be known as a practitioner. This book will tell you how.

**Fergus Scarfe**, Director of Ministry Relations, GOD TV

Josh and Bobby put in the extensive time and effort to find churches with a culture of multiplication . . . The stories of the “Level 5 Churches” will inspire and motivate you to prioritize multiplication in your own life and church.

**Chris Galanos**, Pastor; Author,  
*From Megachurch to Multiplication*

In this important research, my friends Bobby Harrington and Josh Howard studied churches already demonstrating fourth-generation disciple making and surfaced the shared practices that consistently fuel their impact. Take advantage of the hard work behind this research and allow these principles to move your church from good intentions to measurable impact.

**Todd Wilson**, Cofounder, Exponential

For all of us who have wanted clarity on what it looks like to create a church that makes disciples who make disciples who make disciples, my good friends Bobby Harrington and Josh Howard have done us a favor. *7 Practices of Disciple Making Churches* not only provides great principles—they also provide the invaluable examples and interviews that put meat on the bones and bring the picture to life. This book is a blessing and a rich resource that will become a standard for years to come.

**Dr. Marcus Warner**, President, Deeper Walk International;  
Author, *Breakthrough* and *A Deeper Walk*

If you are in a prevailing-model church and want to grow and improve in your disciple making, this is a great resource.

**Curtis Sargeant**, Follower of Jesus

As a young leader, I loved Jim Collins's business case studies *Built to Last* and *Good to Great* as trustworthy (research-based) and practical (example-filled) guides to leading a flourishing organization. As a more "seasoned" leader now, I love Bobby Harrington and Josh Howard's church case studies in *7 Practices of Disciple Making Churches*, a research-based, example-filled guide to leading what they call a "Level 5" disciple making church. In this book, Howard and Harrington do for the kingdom what Jim Collins did for business, and they'll challenge you: don't settle for average or good. With God's help, strive to be great at the Great Commission!

**Matt Proctor**, President, Ozark Christian College

*7 Practices of A Disciple Making Churches* is a wise and timely call to action that replaces complicated strategies with the simple, reproducible methods modeled by Jesus himself. Bobby and Josh provide the strategic clarity and spiritual depth needed to align leadership teams around a singular, powerful focus on making disciples who make disciples—creating an insightful, challenging, and deeply encouraging work.

**Alex Absalom**, Dandelion Resourcing

Christian leaders throw around the word "movement" in a very subjective and lazy way. *7 Practices of Disciple Making Churches* brings that to an end. It offers an objective and exacting definition of what it means to be a Disciple Making Pastor, Church, and Movement. It challenges our assumptions; it holds our feet to the fire. Plan to wrestle with it.

**Bill Hull**, Author, *No Longer a Bystander, I Will Not Bow Down, Time to Stand Up*

An inspiring and practical roadmap—chock-full of real-life stories and examples—to fulfilling Jesus’ mission to be disciples who make disciples. Every church can take their next step in becoming a disciple making church with and through this valuable resource.

**Daniel Im**, Lead Pastor, Beulah Alliance Church; Podcaster;  
Author, *The Discipleship Opportunity*

Finally—a book that doesn’t just talk about disciple making but shows us churches actually doing it. *7 Practices of Disciple Making Churches* gives us more than research; it gives us hope. These aren’t megachurches with endless resources—they’re ordinary communities who’ve cracked the code on what Jesus actually commanded us to do. The seven practices they reveal aren’t complex systems requiring experts; they’re simple, reproducible rhythms that turn everyday believers into disciple makers. This is the field guide we’ve been waiting for.

**Steve McCoy**, Founder, SmallCircle

*7 Practices of Disciple Making Churches* is both timely and deeply necessary. In a church landscape often preoccupied with attendance, activity, and visible success, this book redirects our attention to the mission Jesus actually gave his church—making disciples who make disciples. What sets this work apart is its clarity, honesty, and practicality. The authors move beyond theory and present a compelling vision grounded in careful research and lived experience. They expose the growing gap between church busyness and genuine multiplication. This is not another ministry strategy or programmatic solution. It is a call to recover what has always been central—obedience, spiritual dependence, relational discipleship, and a culture where multiplication becomes normal rather than exceptional. Leaders will find this book both confronting and encouraging. For pastors and leaders longing for lasting kingdom fruit, this book is a vital and refreshing contribution.

**Steve Uppal**, Leader, All Nations Movement; Author,  
*Revival Ready*

This book could be a game changer for us. The task of keeping a church on mission all too often eludes us. Pulling off a weekend event that attracts, enthuses, and retains a crowd is work enough to keep many of us from ever getting around to our real task: making disciple making disciples. It will be intriguing to discover how their counsel, reflecting hands-on experience in North America, India, and Asia, plays in churches here at home. May this short book be the pinch of yeast that infects the whole.

**Phil Claycomb**, Founder and Director, Nexus.us

Both a wake-up call and a real-world hopeful roadmap, packed with lessons learned at the coalface of multiplying movements that make mission possible. Wherever and whenever a church adopts these kingdom principles, not as a program, but as its culture, multiplication of disciples will follow.

**Anthony Delaney**, Senior Pastor, Ivy Church, Manchester UK

The book you have in your hand is for YOU. It is designed to help the church today examine both its structure and its heartbeat for the mission of God. The principles inside are meant to be practiced, not someday, but now.

**Dr. Carl Williamson**, Professor of Discipleship and Church Planting, Harding University

The North American church has been in a long decline, and no small part of the problem has been our unwillingness to make disciple making the main thing. Bobby and Josh show us the habits of those courageous churches that have bucked the trend—churches that actively build disciple making churches. If you care about the future of the church, read this book.

**David Young**, Academic Dean, Renew University

Clear, attainable VISION changes everything! Vision for ministry is not wishful thinking or an emotional hope . . . it is a clear, compelling conception of a desired future! Jesus had a clear, attainable vision for his church . . . we call it the Great Commission. This book will be a great help for any leader who wants to pursue a clear, attainable vision for making disciples in obedience to that Great Commission! Bobby and Josh have done a great job communicating clear, attainable steps any church can take toward becoming a disciple making church . . . transforming every member into a minister in the name of Jesus. If you read this book and apply what you learn . . . your ministry will move from “hoping” you’re making disciples to a clear discipleship pathway everyone in your ministry can take toward a deep, life-changing relationship with Jesus. But there’s no rush . . . read it today and get started tomorrow!

**Cam Huxford**, Pastor Emeritus, Compassion Christian Church,  
Savannah, GA

This is one of the realest field guides you will read on discipleship in the Western church. Real, practical, tried, and true disciple making models that are working right now in the West! This book can help take disciple making in your church beyond theorizing and aspirational dreaming into multiplicative movement, today!

**Joey McLaughlin**, Lead Pastor, Elevate City Church

At MRN, we have been training global workers in DMM for a couple of decades and have witnessed amazing stories of kingdom expansion in other countries. But, the entire time, we have been told, “That might work in those places, but it won’t work in the USA.” Or, we were told, “That might work with immigrants in the USA, but it won’t work with people born here.” No doubt, America’s individualistic culture, with a love of big events, professional leadership, and institutions, presents unique challenges for multiplying disciple making. But Bobby Harrington and Josh Howard have some exciting and compelling evidence

that it is possible to catalyze disciple making practices that can expand exponentially. This practical book tells those stories and captures how to contextualize the practices of disciple making in the United States to foster openings for God's multiplying power to work here like he does around the world. This is good news that needs to be shared widely.

**Dan Bouchelle**, President, Mission Resource Network

This book confronts the uncomfortable truth that most of our churches are busy, but not multiplying. Backed by solid research and anchored in biblical conviction, Harrington and Howard move beyond theory to show what it actually looks like to form disciples who make disciples. For pastors and leaders who refuse to confuse attendance with obedience and who long to see fourth-generation fruit, this book is both a wake-up call and a roadmap forward.

**Dr. Chris Harper**, Chief Storyteller & CEO, BetterMan

As I read *7 Practices of Disciple Making Churches*, my hope for accomplishing The 16% Mission in this generation increases. By learning from these experienced practitioners, I am confident you can accelerate the number of Multipliers—healthy disciple making leaders who champion reproduction—by embodying the practices and insights in this book.

**Jason Stewart**, Executive Director of Mobilization, Exponential

No matter a church's size or resources, those that embrace these practices equip everyday believers to multiply disciples who then make more disciples—just as Jesus modeled and commanded. Harrington and Howard's research offers a clear, proven roadmap that any congregation can follow to turn this biblical vision into living reality.

**Reggie Rice, PhD**, Sr. Director, CCV Leadership Institute



# 7 PRACTICES OF DISCIPLE MAKING CHURCHES

New Research on What Works  
in North America

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**BOBBY HARRINGTON**  
**AND JOSH HOWARD**  
with Mason Eagle

*7 Practices of Disciple Making Churches: New Research on What Actually Works in North America*

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To Jason Henderson and Doug Robertson. You are faithful  
co-workers in Christ who help me more than I can say.

—**Bobby**

To my incredible family—my wife, Lashi, and our children, Josiah,  
Jeremiah, and Zara. Your love, faith, and support mean more to me  
than words can express.

—**Josh**

For my parents, Mike and Michelle, whose constant love and  
support, and whose example of faithfully following Christ and  
modeling disciple making, have shaped my life in countless ways.

—**Mason**

# Introduction

SOMETHING IS DEEPLY WRONG WITH the North American church—and the numbers prove it.

Despite record-breaking budgets, innovative programs, and more ministry resources than any generation in history, most churches aren't growing, let alone multiplying. They're not even treading water. The majority are slowly dying, one unfilled baptismal pool at a time.

In 2020, when Discipleship.org partnered with Exponential and Grey Matter Research to survey one thousand senior pastors about disciple making effectiveness, we expected to find some struggles. What we discovered was far more sobering: the vast majority of churches in North America have no intentional pathway for turning converts into disciple makers. None.

But new research has revealed something else—something that changes everything.

We found churches where multiplication isn't a dream but a reality. Churches where college students are planting congregations before graduation. Where nurses are launching disciple making groups inside hospitals. Where struggling marriages have become training grounds for new leaders. We found churches where the mission of Jesus doesn't live in a mission statement on a website but in the everyday rhythms and muscle memories of ordinary believers.

These aren't megachurches with massive budgets. Most aren't even famous. But they share something far more important than size or resources: they've cracked the code on how to actually do what Jesus commanded us to do—go and make disciples who make disciples.

We call them Level 5 churches (more on that below) because they have cultures that multiply disciples and disciple makers. The teams at

Discipleship.org and Renew.org spent over a year searching for Level 5 disciple making churches and/or church networks. It was a thorough and extensive search for the top disciple making churches in North America. We found nine Level 5 churches and two exemplary Level 4 churches.

We briefly summarize the research below. While each church has its own story, they share a set of common practices that explain their multiplication. These practices will be unpacked in detail through this book, but to help you wrap your mind around where we are going, here are the seven practices for you to ponder:

1. **Convictional Leadership.** Leaders at every level must have a deep, non-negotiable conviction that disciple making is the core mission of the church. This conviction flows from the Great Commission and shapes every decision.
2. **Obedience-Based, Reproducible Models.** Level 5 churches do not simply transfer knowledge; they train for obedience. Their models are intentionally simple so that every believer can reproduce them.
3. **Prayer and Scripture as Foundations.** Renewal flows from direct engagement with God's Word and fervent, corporate prayer. These are not optional practices but the engine of transformation.
4. **Relational Community.** Discipleship happens life-on-life, not primarily in programs or classes. Level 5 churches cultivate communities where believers share life and walk together in obedience.
5. **Clear Pathways and Expectations.** People need visible next steps. Level 5 churches provide clear pathways into discipleship and set expectations that every believer will engage.
6. **Mission Beyond the Walls.** Disciple making is not confined to church activities. It extends into neighborhoods, workplaces,

schools, and even across nations. Evangelism and mission are integral to discipleship.

7. **Leadership Alignment.** Finally, leaders align the entire church around these principles. Staff, elders, and volunteers all “bleed” disciple making, ensuring the culture is consistent.

These practices are not theoretical. They are embodied in real churches across North America that are living out Level 5 disciple making today. Their stories, which will fill the coming chapters, demonstrate that multiplication is not only possible but reproducible in diverse contexts.

This book is the story of how we found these churches, what they’re doing right, and what they can teach the rest of us. But before we introduce you to these churches, we need to anchor ourselves in the mission Jesus himself gave to us. We want to first make that case that disciple making must be at the heart of everything the church does.

## Why Disciple Making Matters

The conviction behind this book isn’t new. Followers of Jesus have always believed that the church exists for something far deeper than programs, personalities, or gatherings. Few have expressed it more clearly than C. S. Lewis, who wrote:

“The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose.”<sup>1</sup>

At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus did not offer his disciples a suggestion or even a strategy. He gave them a *command*:

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19–20)

Jesus' parting command was clear: his disciples were to make disciples, and the disciples they made *were to obey all of his teachings*—including this one—to make more disciples!

This chain of obedience means that fully obedient disciples who learn to make other disciples perpetuate the movement Jesus began, from one generation to the next, “to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

One of Jesus' first disciples would later write, “We know that we have come to know [Jesus] if we keep his commands. Whoever says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.” (1 John 2:3–6)

Tough words.

But make no mistake.

Jesus really *does* want us to make disciples.

The apostle John, inspired by the Holy Spirit, gave two proofs that a believer truly knows Jesus: they keep his commands and they imitate him. Mature believers obey and imitate Jesus . . . and that includes making *more* disciples of him.

While obedience is a good reason for making disciples, it's not our deepest motivation.

Love is.

It's love for God and love for others that compel us to make disciples of Jesus.

## Love as Our Deepest Motive

When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, he gave two: love God and love others (Matthew 22:36–40; Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18). But notice what John said: “If anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them” (1 John 2:5a).

We don't get to define what it means to “love God and love others.” We look to the totality of Jesus' words and teachings.

Think of it this way: If I've been saved by the gospel of Jesus, I have received the greatest gift a person could possibly receive. If I truly love people, how could I not want to disciple them into receiving that same gift?

I (Josh) often think about what is truly at stake in this mission. Every single day, an estimated 44,000 people around the world die without Christ and step into eternity separated from God. Charles Spurgeon captured this burden well when he wrote, "If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our dead bodies . . . let no one go there un-warned or un-prayed for." If we genuinely love people, we cannot remain passive about their eternal destiny.

What about after they receive God's grace and are saved? Love for God and others remains my ongoing, driving motivation for fuller disciple making, not just of lost people, but of the saved. We know that God wants us to become more and more like Christ. If that's what God wants for others—and if I truly love them—then surely I will want to help disciple them into Christlikeness.

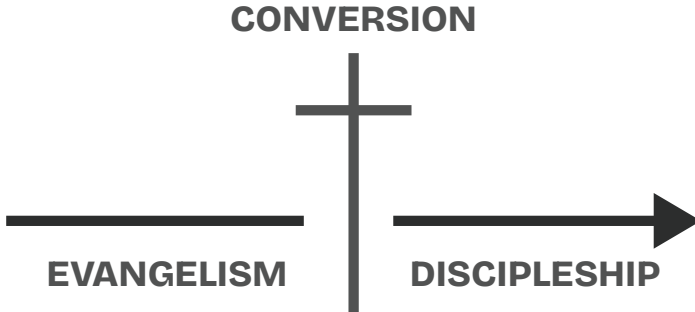
This is how Paul described his disciple making ministry:

He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me. (Colossians 1:28–29)

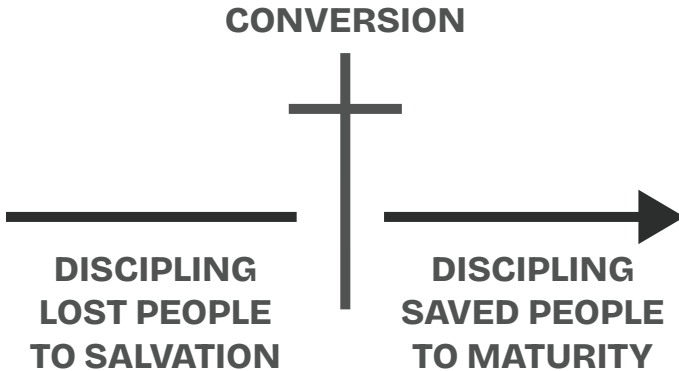
If we love God, we will love those whom he loves. God loves lost people, and he loves saved people. "[God] wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:4). Notice that God's desire is not only that all people be saved, but that they "come to a knowledge of the truth." God wills that all those who are saved be discipled in "the truth that is in Jesus" and Christlikeness (Ephesians 4:21b).

Rather than seeing evangelism and discipleship as two separate processes, Matthew 28:19–20 shows us that they're *both* components of disciple making.

Too often, Christians view the process this way:



But that is not what we find in God's Word. Instead, the following illustrates a more biblical picture of salvation:<sup>2</sup>



Disciple making focuses on leading the lost to salvation, *and* on leading the saved to full obedience (i.e., Christlikeness).

The biblical model is to disciple lost people to salvation by loving them and leading them into Jesus and his gospel until they are baptized. Then, we *continue* to disciple the saved into the image of Jesus by loving them and leading them to be transformed by Jesus as they learn to keep all that he taught and commanded them.<sup>3</sup>

As Paul wrote: “You heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:21–24).

Our fundamental motivation as disciples is to make other disciples *because* we love God and love people.

## **When We Love People, We Want What’s Best for Them**

If you love someone, you want their best. When we make true disciples, they become better people. Better singles or spouses. Better family members. Better workers. Better citizens of their communities, cities, states, and countries.

To help people come to know Christ and learn to be transformed into the image and likeness of Christ is the best and most loving thing we can do for them.

Imagine if a significant portion of the population began to treat everyone around them the way that Jesus would. What would that look like?! *That* is the beautiful mission God has entrusted to his disciples and his church.

## **Jesus’ Method Is the Best Method**

Jesus showed us how to love and disciple people. His method of making disciples was deeply relational, intentional, and, we believe, reproducible. We believe it is the perfect method for our ministries and churches today.

His life-on-life relational model was perfect because Jesus himself was the most brilliant person who ever lived; in Christ, Scripture tells us, all the fullness of God lived in bodily form.

What was Jesus' method? He began by calling a few to be *with him*, teaching, coaching, guiding, and shaping them through a shared life before sending them out. He taught truth in everyday contexts, modeling obedience, dependence on the Father, and love expressed through action rather than mere words. Because Jesus fully loved God his Father and fully loved people, his disciple making model was love embodied—forming men and women who would live and lead the same way.

Wherever possible, we keep looking to his example as our guide.<sup>4</sup>

## Disciple Making as the Core Mission of the Church

If the church's aim is to lead people to salvation and then see every believer formed into the likeness of Jesus, then disciple making is not one priority among many—it is *the* priority, the church's central mission.

We won't take time in this book to make that case, but I (Bobby) and Scott Sager wrote a short book for church leadership teams on this teaching: *Disciple Making: The Core Mission of the Church*.<sup>5</sup>

I (Josh) discovered this truth in a most unexpected way. When I was in college, God gripped my heart for the nations. At a missions conference, I got down on my knees and surrendered my life completely. I prayed, "God, I don't care where I am or what I'm doing. I don't care if I'm in Haiti for fifty years or working in a gas station for fifty years. Just use me."

What God said in response broke my heart and changed my life. God whispered, "Josh, I don't need you."

I was confused. *What do you mean you don't need me? You called me to missions. I just laid down my life for you.* Then God followed with words that reshaped everything: "Josh, I don't need you. But I want you."

That shift—from believing I was needed to realizing I was *wanted*—changed everything.

For some of us, pride and ego have convinced us that we are God's solution, that our church is the answer. No. *Jesus* is the answer. And when we stop believing we're needed and start living like we're wanted, we are able to follow Jesus into a life of disciple making with humble, grateful hearts.

## A Disciple Who Makes Disciples

There are many competing definitions of what a "disciple" is, but few are both simple and complete. For nearly twenty years, we have used and taught a definition learned from Jim Putman that is practical, biblically grounded, and proven. It comes from Jesus' invitation to Peter and Andrew:

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." (Mark 1:17, ESV)

In this single verse, we can find three elements of what it means to be a disciple:

- Following Jesus ("Follow me")
- Being changed by Jesus ("and I will make you become")
- Joining the mission of Jesus ("fishers of men")

Using this framework, thousands of church leaders working with Renew.org and Discipleship.org have adopted the following definition of a disciple:

*A disciple is someone who is following Jesus, being changed by Jesus, and is committed to the mission of Jesus.*<sup>6</sup>

This definition clarifies the task of church leadership. Our goal is not only that people decide to follow Jesus, but that they be transformed into his likeness. And as people come to truly know and love Jesus, they will naturally begin to do what he did—they will make disciples.

That is the vision this book will champion:

. . . Disciples who make disciples . . .

This book brings welcome news. You know that beautiful vision of churches filled with regular disciples multiplying disciples as part of everyday life? We discovered that it doesn't only exist in mission statements or on distant continents. Our research led us to places where that vision was unfolding right here in North America. We'll introduce you to that research in the next chapter . . .

# 1 The Search for Churches That Multiply Disciples

MOST PASTORS FEEL THE TENSION long before they can articulate it.

You preach faithfully. You baptize new believers. You celebrate wins. You launch ministries and groups and events. Your calendar is full and your church is active. Yet somewhere deep inside, a quiet ache keeps whispering a haunting question you don't dare say out loud:

“Are we actually making disciples who make disciples . . . or are we just keeping people busy?”

Across North America, millions of Christians gather every weekend with sincerity and passion. But beneath the surface of all that activity, something is breaking. Something essential. Something Jesus intended to be the norm.

The fact of the matter is that the majority of churches in North America have plateaued or are in decline. Even those that are growing are often growing by addition, not multiplication. They can claim increased attendance, but struggle to point to disciples who are making disciples. Instead, they simply draw people into the church—often through attractational services, strong preaching, compelling worship, and well-run programs. These are good things, but in and of themselves, they rarely produce disciples who reproduce.

It's addition. That may fill church buildings, but it's not life-on-life engagement. It's not multiplication.

***And that gap—between activity and reproduction, between busyness and transformation—has become the quiet crisis of the modern church.***

I (Josh) discovered how deep this crisis runs while serving in India. Our small team gathered one day to pray about reaching 1.3 billion people with the gospel. There were eight of us. Eight people trying to reach 1.3 billion lost souls.

One team member said, “What if we could reach 100,000 people a year? Wouldn’t that be incredible?” I pulled out my calculator. At that rate, it would take 13,000 years. Even if we somehow reached a million people every single year, it would still take 1,300 years—just to reach India alone.

Addition was never going to get the job done.

We got on our knees and asked God to show us a different path. He led us to the story of Ying Kai and his wife Grace in South China, who intentionally focused on multiplying disciples rather than simply adding attendees. Over ten years, more than 200,000 churches were started, and over a million people were baptized.

So we decided to make the same shift—from addition to multiplication. Last year alone, the network of churches we serve launched 8,070 new churches. That’s twenty-two churches every single day.

That isn’t human effort. That is the power of multiplication. And what God is doing in India isn’t limited to India. The same thing can happen in North America—if we’re willing to move from addition to multiplication.

The quiet crisis we were facing in India is the same one facing many churches in North America: plenty of activity, but very little multiplication.

This book is for you. It’s for the pastor who’s tired of shallow metrics, for the church planter who refuses to settle for merely drawing a crowd, for the elder who knows deep down that something fundamental is missing from their church. This is for every leader who’s ever asked: Is there a better way?

The answer is yes.

And we found the churches that were proving it.

But before we turn to those churches, we need to face a stark reality.

## The 5 Percent Problem

In 2020, Discipleship.org published the results of a 2019 study on disciple making cultures. They partnered with Exponential and Grey Matter Research to conduct one of the most extensive studies ever done on disciple making cultures in Protestant churches in the U.S.<sup>7</sup> Researchers interviewed 1,000 senior pastors across a range of denominations, regions, and church sizes, and asked hard questions about disciple making effectiveness.

The results should alarm every church leader in North America.

- Just under 5 percent of churches had cultures rooted in Jesus-style disciple making.

Think about that. It means that 95 percent of our churches *do not* have a culture of disciple making. That number saddens and astounds us.

Here's what it means in practice:

- Life-on-life disciple making is *not* the functional mission of our local churches.
- Pastors and leaders are *not* personally practicing Jesus-style relational disciple making.
- Pastors and leaders are *not* equipping their members to be effective disciple makers (meaning that people do not know how to be disciples who make disciples).

One of our friends summarized the information with this tongue-in-cheek statement:

*Our churches have adopted the functional mission of going into all the world and making more church attenders, baptizing them in the name of programs, and teaching them to volunteer a few times a month.*

## The 95 Percent Reality

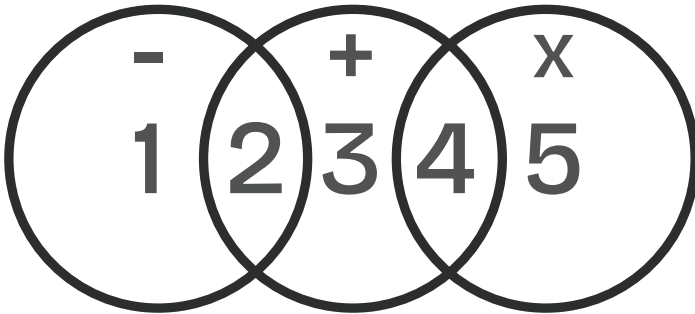
The fact that just over 95 percent of churches do not have a relational, disciple making culture demands an explanation. In a book I (Bobby) wrote with Jim Putman called *Discipleshift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples*<sup>8</sup>, we examined the dominant ways churches are structured—and why most of them fail to produce multiplying disciples.

In that book, we identified several common alternatives that have replaced relational disciple making in the vast majority of churches:

- The attractional church—where most everything revolves around the church building and is focused on preaching, praise and worship, and programs.
- The educational church—where most everything is focused on in-depth Bible teaching on Sundays, usually by the senior pastor.
- The missional church—where most everything is focused on social justice, social conscience, and personal spiritual practices (and often liturgy).
- The organic/home church—where most everything is focused on fellowship, relationships, and personal support.

These four models share the same problem: they are incomplete and one-dimensional. Over time, their weaknesses become evident. But most importantly, they are not focused on disciple making.

For clarity, we have grouped the 95 percent of churches without disciple making cultures using a simple “mathematical” framework—using the terms subtracting, plateauing, adding, reproducing, and multiplying.



*Level 1: Subtracting // Level 2: Plateauing // Level 3: Adding  
Level 4: Reproducing // Level 5: Multiplying*

The first three levels, Levels 1 through 3, describe over 95 percent of the churches in the US.

- **Level 1** – *Subtracting disciples*—28 percent of the churches in the US fit into this category. These churches are declining and losing people.
- **Level 2** – *Plateauing with disciples*—42 percent of the churches in the US fit into this category. These churches have plateaued. While they are not losing people, they are not adding people either.
- **Level 3** – *Adding disciples*—26 percent of the churches in the US fit into this category. These churches attract and grow by adding disciples. The addition is typically driven by preaching, praise and worship, and programs—or for some, through the teaching/preaching prowess of the lead pastor.

There are two more levels, Levels 4 and 5, but *we could not find any Level 5 churches at all in the US when we published the study in 2020*. The differences between Level 4 and 5 are subtle yet profoundly important, so we will describe each one in more detail below.

- **Level 4 – Reproducing disciples**—less than 5 percent of churches in the U.S. fit into this category.<sup>9</sup> Level 4 churches are numerically growing churches who are characterized by reproducing disciples and disciple making. The pastoral staff are coaches who focus on intentionally developing disciple makers. Discipling groups are an everyday reality within these churches because of constant vision casting and energy focused on making disciple makers. Leaders create systems that are actively discipling other people in groups and actively and continuously advocate for intentionality. They champion agreed-upon disciple making practices and groups. These leaders champion disciple making for the whole church because they know it is not the norm. All the leaders and the clear majority of those who are considered part of a Level 4 church (75 percent or more) are actively involved in discipling groups that are based on and practice a good philosophy of reproduction.
- **Level 5 – Multiplying disciples**—these are churches where everyday people naturally participate in and fuel multiplying disciple making activities. In Level 5 churches, individual disciple making is the core DNA and culture of the church, where church members are making disciples to the fourth generation. This disciple making activity is regularly produced in significant and diverse streams within the church, and these streams multiply consistently into new churches. Disciple making has become so thoroughly entrenched in the culture of the church that leadership would have to work hard to stop it. There are examples of Level 5 churches flourishing in various places around the world, but sadly no examples were found in the US at the time of this study.<sup>10</sup>

The research we published in 2020 became the starting point for a new search in 2025. As questions poured in, church leaders across

North America were asking the same thing: *Where are the churches that are actually making disciples who make disciples?*

So we set out again, this time to find Level 5 disciple making churches, along with exemplary Level 4 churches.

We are grateful for the new research and what we found!

## The Search for Level 5 Churches

We began with a question: “What would it look like if disciple making wasn’t a ministry of the church . . . but the *culture* of the church?”

We assumed that by 2025, Level 5 churches were out there in North America—churches multiplying disciples, groups, leaders, and even churches. They were, but finding them wasn’t easy. Most didn’t advertise themselves. Many didn’t even know they were “special.” They were simply obeying Jesus in simple, reproducible ways.

We interviewed hundreds of leaders, sifted through piles of data, asked practitioners to name churches that were actually multiplying, and listened to stories of both heartbreak and hope.

And in our search, we discovered something breathtaking.

## What You’ll Encounter in This Book

As you read ahead, you will meet:

A pastor who wanted to quit the ministry until God interrupted him and sparked a global disciple making model that has spread from Georgia to North Carolina and from there to Sweden.

Another pastor whose Houston-based disciple making movement has church plants throughout Honduras, Colombia, and across the Horn of Africa. (A theme you’ll see throughout this book is that God uses timeless principles in beyond-what-we-can-imagine ways.)

A decentralized microchurch network in Florida that is mobilizing ordinary believers into dozens of everyday mission fields.

A college-town church where students plant churches before they graduate, fueled by rhythms of prayer, fasting, and Scripture that is reshaping an entire generation.

A congregation in Texas where a struggling marriage was restored, sobriety was found, and leadership emerged, where a couple once overlooked now shepherds a young adult movement.

A nurse in Atlanta who took a simple ten-week model and launched a multiplying movement—inside her hospital.

These stories—and dozens more—aren't outliers. They're signs. Indicators. Signals that multiplication is not only possible . . . it's already happening.

And more importantly: This kind of multiplication can happen anywhere. It can happen with anyone. It can happen in *your* church. If, and only if, you embrace the practices that every Level 5 church shares.

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***This kind of multiplication can happen anywhere. It can happen in your church.***

## **Why Level 5 Matters Now More Than Ever**

Jesus never told the church to grow crowds. He told us to make disciples—and true disciples become disciple makers.

The book of Acts is a story of ordinary people carrying the gospel everywhere they went—and the world was changed because the movement multiplied.

But somewhere along the way, the modern North American church traded multiplication for maintenance, disciple making for programming, and mission for metrics.

The result?

A continent filled with mostly sincere Christians and mostly stagnant churches.

But imagine with us—just for a moment—what could happen if multiplication became normal again. Imagine: Neighborhoods where believers lead Discovery Bible Studies around dinner tables (Bible

studies whose goal is knowing, doing, and then sharing with others); workplaces with disciple making streams flowing three or four generations deep; groups that reproduce regularly; leaders who train leaders; churches that plant churches; disciples who see multiplication as their identity, not an optional ministry; cities where disciple making spreads faster than cynicism. A continent reshaped not by strategy but by obedience.

That is the promise—and the invitation—of Level 5.

## Where This Journey Takes You

You might be asking, especially if you are already a leader of an established church, why pursue Level 5 disciple making when you already have a hundred other demands on your plate?

I (Bobby) want to speak into this, because I feel that tension myself. It's a good question. I believe pursuing Level 5 disciple making will best prepare your church and your people for the future—especially your young leaders. It's easy for me to get frustrated after years of leading in the range of Level 4, especially leading a church in a Bible Belt culture that has proven resistant to relational disciple making.

Too often the people who attend our church just want it to be about the three Ps: Preaching, Praise and Worship, and Programs. Each of these points of focus can have a place, but more often than not, they become a programmatic replacement for Jesus-style disciple making.

Let me be clear: pursuing the dynamics of Level 5 is so worth it. We now have so many people in our church who see themselves not just as “Christians” but as disciples who are making disciples. This has required the constant intentionality of our leadership to keep the focus on reproduction (which is a Level 4 focus), which in turn is setting the stage for younger leaders to build reproduction onto multiplication.

My biggest hope, strengthened by the discoveries described in this book, is that we will multiply countless Level 5 leaders (like Joey

McGloughlins, Brandon Guindons, and others you will read about below), as well as new churches that will transform how people think about disciple making in the church of the future. I believe any steps you can take toward Level 5 will be worth it.

In the chapters ahead, you will:

- Discover how we identified the top multiplying churches in North America.
- Get a clear set of definitions to help you better understand our disciple making language
- Receive a compelling introduction to the seven shared principles that Level 5 churches share and that drive multiplication everywhere they appear.
- See each put into practice, embodied through real churches, real leaders, and real stories.
- Learn how to begin this journey in your own context—not with complexity but with obedience.

This isn't just a research book. It's a map. A field guide. A vision. A call. A dare.

Because the question is no longer: "Can multiplication happen in America?" It already is. The real question—and the one every leader

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***This isn't just a research book. It's a map. A vision. A dare.***

must wrestle with—is this: ***"Will we become the kind of church where it can happen?"***

We invite you to discover what makes churches multiply—and how your church can become one of them.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. When you honestly assess your church, what percentage of your congregation would you estimate is actively involved in making disciples who make disciples? What evidence supports that estimate?
2. The research cited on page 13 found that only 5 percent of churches have a disciple making culture (Level 4 churches). Where would you place your church on this spectrum?
3. Review the four church models that do not focus on disciple making on page 14. Which of these models does your church most readily identify with? Does your church have a clear model? Do you have a way to measure disciple making? Both? Neither?
4. What do you think might be “broken” in the modern church’s approach to disciple making? What’s broken in your own context?
5. The introduction suggests that most pastors overestimate how many disciples their churches are actually making. Have you ever fallen into this trap? What creates the gap between our perception and reality?
6. If multiplication (not just activity or addition) became the primary metric of success in your church, what would need to change immediately? What would you need to stop doing? What would you need to start doing?



# 2 How We Found the Churches That Multiply

MOST CHURCH RESEARCH BEGINS WITH assumptions. Ours began with a hunt.

If we were going to help pastors rediscover multiplication, we couldn't just rely on anecdotes or platitudes delivered from conference stages. We needed to find actual churches where disciple making wasn't a side ministry, a motto on a website, or a leadership aspiration. We needed to find churches where multiplication was observable, measurable, reproducible, and normal.

But how do you go about finding churches like that from among the over 350,000 Protestant churches across North America?

You learn to follow the signs.

And that's what this chapter is about: how we followed those signs—from a wide range of possibilities to the clearest examples of Level 5 disciple making churches today.

Before we introduce you to these churches . . . before you hear their stories . . . before you discover the principles that unite them . . . you need to know how we found them.

Because if our process is trustworthy, then our discoveries will be too.

## **Beginning the Search: Practitioners and Proven Networks**

Our journey began where all good investigations begin—with known evidence. Disciple making movements rarely grow in isolation. Churches that multiply disciples tend to know other churches that multiply disciples. So we turned to trusted networks. We reached out to the 100+ largest denominations and networks in North America. We expended every effort over a long period of time, reaching out to every potential contact we could find, from humble local pastors to prominent national leaders. Here are some of the specific denominations and networks we contacted:

- Southern Baptist State Conventions
- The Send Network
- Calvary Chapels
- Exponential Network
- Converge
- Methodist churches
- Pentecostal churches
- Presbyterian churches
- Anglican churches
- Lutheran churches
- Renew.org Network
- Holiness churches
- Non-denominational Networks (ARC, etc.)
- Congregationalist churches
- Christian Churches/Churches of Christ
- The Relational Discipleship Network

We talked to every regional network and movement catalyst we could find and to many individual churches and church leaders. We asked them a simple but weighty question:

“Can you point us to churches where multiplication isn’t theory, but reality?”

We weren’t looking for churches with great weekend numbers. Or churches known for creativity or technology. Or even churches with inspiring preaching.

We wanted the churches where disciple making streams ran deep and long—where leaders were raising up leaders who raised up leaders. Churches meeting at least seven of the ten criteria you’ll read below.

We weren’t interested in churches that said they wanted multiplication. We were looking for churches where multiplication already had a pulse.

## **The Ten Criteria: How We Evaluated Each Church**

As leads began appearing, we evaluated every candidate according to the following ten criteria. Together, they provide a full picture of multiplication—not just in terms of activity or aspiration, but in terms of culture and fruit.

### ***1. Disciple Making Mission***

Does the church explicitly commit to making disciples who make disciples as its core mission?

*Why it matters:* If disciple making is one ministry among many, it competes for attention. In Level 5 churches, disciple making defines everything.

### ***2. Cultural Identity***

Is disciple making “what we do around here”?

*Why it matters:* Culture always trumps strategy. If the people don’t breathe disciple making, the church won’t multiply.

### **3. Relational Environment**

Are believers growing through life-on-life community?

*Why it matters:* You can teach people in rows, but they are formed in circles.

### **4. Simple, Reproducible Models**

Can anyone—new believers, teenagers, non-staff leaders—pick up and use the church’s disciple making process themselves?

*Why it matters:* If it’s too complex to reproduce, it’s too complex to multiply.

### **5. Obedience-Based Pathways**

Does the church train people to do what Jesus commanded and not just know what he taught?

*Why it matters:* Multiplication happens through obedience, not through information transfer.

### **6. Engagement in Mission**

Are people moving outward into neighborhoods, workplaces, and networks?

*Why it matters:* Disciple making without mission becomes self-referential and stagnant.

### **7. Leadership Development**

Does the church have a pipeline that forms leaders who form leaders?

*Why it matters:* Movement requires leadership at every layer.

### **8. Generational Fruit**

Is there evidence of second-, third-, and fourth-generation disciple makers?

*Why it matters:* Multiplication is proven over time, not in isolated stories.

## ***9. Church Planting and Sending***

Does the church plant churches and send leaders into new fields?

*Why it matters:* Multiplication happens when disciples make disciples. This naturally pushes outward to new churches.

## ***10. Measurable Outcomes***

Can the church point to stories, baptisms, groups, and leaders that demonstrate a multiplying impact?

*Why it matters:* What you measure reveals what you value.

## **Ensuring Validity: Why You Can Trust What Follows**

Churches didn't make our list because of reputation, personality, or buzz. We built safeguards into every part of the process to ensure what we found reflected reality.

- **Multiple Data Points:** No church qualified based on a single data source. We triangulated assessment data, interviews, referrals, and firsthand stories.
- **Consistency:** Every church answered the same core questions, allowing us to compare apples to apples.
- **Evidence over Aspiration:** We did not include churches that merely claimed multiplication. We looked for real fruit—reproducible stories, community streams, baptism patterns, and generational impact.
- **An Objective Assessment:** All the churches in our survey took the assessment that was developed in 2020 to determine, by specific, quantitative questions, whether or not they had a disciple making culture.<sup>11</sup>
- **Cross-Checking:** In many cases, in-depth interviews with lead pastors were supplemented by interviews with other leaders within the same church to confirm accuracy.

- Case Studies: We conducted deep dives into each church’s practices, models, and culture to understand not just what they do, but how and why they do it.

Our goal wasn’t to find perfect churches. None of the churches in this book would claim that. Our goal was to find *faithful* churches, where disciple making is not peripheral or inspirational—but central.

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***Our goal was to find faithful churches where disciple making was central.***

### **Where the Journey Leads Next**

After months of interviews, referrals, analysis, and case studies, a set of churches emerged that consistently demonstrated Level 5 disciple making culture. Not theoretical. Not aspirational. *Actual.*

#### ***Level 5 Disciple Making Churches/Networks***

Name	Institution	Location
Doug Burrier	Three Taverns Church	Acworth, Georgia
Dave Bushnell	Life Center Church	Spokane, Washington
Guy Caskey	The M4 Network	North America
Brad Daugherty	New Beginnings Church	Longview, Texas
Brandon Guindon	Real Life Ministries Texas	Tomball, Texas
Ed Kang	The Acts2 Network	North America
Joey McLaughlin	Elevate City Church	Atlanta, Georgia
Lucas Pulley	Tampa Underground (microchurches)	Tampa, Florida
Robin Wallar	LIFT Church	Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

These churches are a diverse group spread across regions, denominations, sizes, and styles. What they share is not a method, but a mindset. Not a model, but a mission. Not a set of programs, but a culture.

## The Elephant in the Room

You might be reading this and feeling inspired and motivated, ready to dive in and learn all you can from these churches.

Or you might be feeling a bit more . . . guarded . . .

If you're a church leader, you've probably seen top church lists before—most baptisms in a year, fastest growing churches, largest megachurches in North America, and so on. Such lists *can* be inspiring, but they can also feel demotivating to those of us who are doing our best for God and just seeing modest results.

Please know we're featuring these churches and their stories not to create competition but to provide encouragement. If you long to see multiplying movements here in North America, we bring good news: It's totally possible! We're seeing it here! It's our hope that introducing these churches and telling their stories will encourage you in the principles and practices you're already pursuing as well as open your eyes to areas that need additional focus and intentionality.

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***If you long to  
see multiplying  
movements  
in North  
America, it's  
totally possible!***

Again, I (Bobby) lead a church in the Nashville area which struggles to be in the Level 4 range, as our church fights a wider consumer Christian culture in the Bible Belt. People often want a church that makes their lives easy—great preaching and programs to meet their needs because they think there isn't enough time to be a disciple who makes disciples.

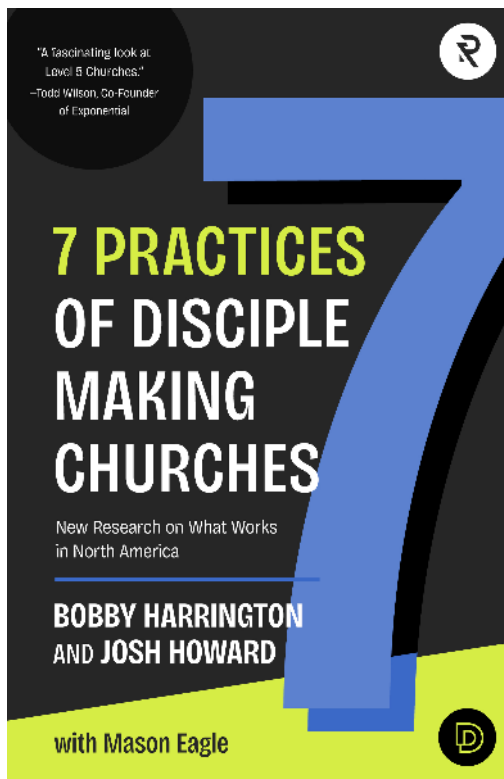
I am proud of the dedicated disciples whom I help lead, even as we know there is room for our church to grow. Spending time with the leaders of these Level 5 churches has helped me see areas our church can lean into if we are to be a church whose culture is for

everyday disciples to multiply disciples. I encourage you to read on with hopefulness, as this book is meant to be both a reassuring hand on your shoulder and a guide toward even greater fruitfulness.

In chapter 3, we'll briefly introduce you to the seven principles we found that all of these Level 5 churches followed and consistently put into practice. Then in the following chapters, we'll dive in and explore each one in more detail.

## **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. Review the ten criteria used to evaluate Level 5 churches on pages 25-27. Which two or three criteria does your church demonstrate most clearly? Which two or three represent your biggest gaps? How do you feel about your observations?
2. The chapter emphasizes looking for “observable, measurable, reproducible” multiplication rather than mere aspirations or intentions. What observable evidence of multiplication exists in your church right now? Are you seeing second-, third-, or fourth-generation disciples? Why or why not? If so, where are you seeing it? What are the reasons, in your opinion, behind what you are observing?
3. If someone from outside your church evaluated you using these ten criteria, what would surprise them most—positively or negatively?
4. The research prioritized churches where “multiplication already had a pulse” rather than churches that merely wanted multiplication. What would it take for multiplication to have a pulse in your context? Be specific.
5. Which of the ten criteria feels most urgent for your church to address first? Why that one?



*To see the rest of the book,  
click [HERE](#).*

# About the Authors

**Dr. Bobby Harrington**—Bobby is the founding and lead pastor of Harpeth Christian Church (by the Harpeth River outside Nashville) and cofounder and point leader of Renew.org and Discipleship.org. He’s authored or edited dozens of books on disciple making and theology. He holds graduate degrees from Harding University and Southern Seminary. He is a Canadian who lives in Franklin, Tennessee, with his wife. They have two children and six grandchildren.

**Josh Howard**—Josh desires to raise up disciples who make disciples, leaders who create leaders, and churches that plant churches. In 2015, he launched a ministry called “Ignite,” which has seen over fifty thousand churches started in about ten years through movements of multiplication in South Asia. Josh currently serves as the Director of Vision and Mobilization at Discipleship.org and Global Mobilization Catalyst for E3 Partners. He is the coauthor of *No Turning Back* and *Igniting Movements: Multiplying Churches in Dark Places*. Besides God’s grace through Jesus, he is most thankful for his wife, Lashi, his two sons, Josiah and Jeremiah, and his daughter, Zara.

**Mason Eagle**—Mason served as the primary analyst and researcher for the follow-up study on disciple making cultures at Discipleship.org, where he works as a data analyst. He also leads app development for Renew University and is completing a master’s degree in data analytics at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. In addition to his research work, Mason remains actively involved in local church disciple making, coleading a transformation group and investing in students and young adults through ongoing mentoring and leadership.