

Discernment and Development

How one church helps guide present and future workers

Ron Burdock is the director of global outreach at North Park Community Church in London, Ontario, Canada. After 25 years as a business owner, Ron studied at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies and then eight years ago accepted the missions leadership role at North Park. His passion is global partnership and seeing high-value people and resources invested in the work of mission.



Postings interviews Ron here about North Park's unique D2 program that provides discernment and development guidance for future and current global workers. Throughout the text are links to video interviews with D2 team members and those who have benefitted from D2 help.

Postings: What led you to create the D2 program? What was the gap that needed to be filled?

Ron: There were three things really. **First**, we noticed that many candidates did not have a well developed approach to discerning their own calling/mission. People would come to me and say, "God called me to do x, y, or z," but their explanation seemed weak or without any concrete indicators to affirm their convictions.

In many cases, these aspiring missionaries would name a group of people praying for them—often their small group. As I talked with them further, it became clear that that body of people had not been given any specific prayer focus or criteria to pray through. They were simply asked to pray for the individual.

I believe there is something sacred about sending out workers, so sacred that we would benefit from putting together a

carefully selected group of people to walk with the individual in a process of "disciplined discernment" about future ministry. At North Park we are still learning, but the best way we have found to engage our sending role is to create what we call "D2s." These teams come around a potential worker and enter into a season of observation, interaction, and verification of their journey. Our goal is to **develop** them (D1) and to speak into their ministry decisions with **discernment** (D2).

Second, we noticed that bringing up questions related to missionary growth and readiness was sometimes viewed as creating unfair stress or was even "against God's will." As a result, there was this tendency for us to superficially affirm

people without actually addressing the tough questions related to their journey. We realized that while it was difficult for one person to tackle sensitive issues, it was much easier for a circle of people to do so. As we came together, we were able

to affirm positive traits as well as define and speak to traits or realities that needed to be addressed for growth.

Third, there is a tendency today for the mission agency to do all of the screening and approval of missionary applications. The local congregation may be considered the sending church but often comes into the deployment

process very late. As a church, we felt awkward if we had to stand before our congregation and say, "We are sending this individual out," if we did not know the appointee that well. In order to genuinely send people as local churches are called to do, we needed to engage in a more thorough approval process, walking hand in hand with the mission agency and the individual. It's hard work. But as we learn how to walk

D2
Discern
Develop

A carefully selected group of people are asked to enter into a season of observation, interaction, and verification of a person's journey. Our goal is to develop them and to speak into their ministry decisions with discernment.

together through this process, we are thrilled that God is giving us positive results so that we can affirm with much greater confidence those we are sending.

Watch the [video](#) explanation that further describes the D2 concept.

Postings: How does a prospective worker enter the D2 process?

Ron: We have a new emphasis on global internships where people spend 1-2 years in a global setting aligned with their sense of calling. We have developed a mentoring team that walks with these interns so that we can participate in their journey early on. Where we think it is appropriate, we move from the internship into a D2 experience, creating a path that can confirm and then help launch the person into effective global service. As they see the advantages of internships and D2s, people are requesting us to walk with them in these ways.

Our goal is to know our interns and other potential workers well so that we begin to take the initiative. We want to start proactively inviting into the process those we sense have a calling for global service. As you can imagine, this is challenging work; we need to build capacity into our leadership team in order to do it well.

Watch the [video](#) of one couple's description of their D2 experience.

Postings: Are there standard elements that are always a part of the D2 process?

Ron: For each one, we draft a customized document that outlines the goals, timelines, and requirements for both the individual and the D2 team.

The first step is having the individual write up a biography as well as a description of the various steps to date in their missional journey. These two self-reflection essays provide background for serious decision making. Then they take some testing such as Myers-Briggs, Kolbe, and DISC. Early on, they meet with a staff person from the [Missionary Health Institute](#) to open up a conversation to assess their mental/emotional wellbeing. The D2 also collects references.

Some type of regular service is required of the person in the D2, and conversations with their ministry supervisor provide insight into their maturity, gifts, and ministry skills. Often the supervisor is a member of the D2 team.

As we move forward, the individual completes specific requirements related to their own sense of future/calling. This

D2
Discern
Develop

For each one, we draft a customized document that outlines the goals, timelines, and requirements for both the individual and the D2 team.



helps the D2 identify where the person is strong and where they need help. In some cases, a member of the D2 team will take on tasks such as researching possible areas of service or a prospective agency, but the majority of the effort has to be invested by the individual.

D2s generally meet monthly with the individual to talk and pray about the different things they are working on. A leader keeps the process moving at a constant and yet doable pace. After a few weeks/months, there are "observables" that lead to a sense of discernment about the individual's calling/character/capacity.

At some point in the process, the D2 team writes what we are now calling a "Discernment Statement"—a summary of what has been observed about the individual. This is a handcrafted statement that has the endorsement of the whole D2 team and that affirms the individual's strengths as well as expresses confidence or concern regarding their anticipated missional direction.

Postings: What is the general timeframe for the whole D2 process?

Ron: Ideally it is 12 to 18 months for a future worker, but sometimes we only discover that a person is moving toward global service when they are well along in the appointment process. In such cases, we

may have just a few months to walk with them.

When a person is highly gifted, has a strong track record, and is clear on their calling, the process can move quickly.

We simply acknowledge what we see to be obvious. We can do that in as little as three months.

D2
Discern
Develop

After a few weeks/months, there are "observables" that lead to a sense of discernment about the individual's calling/character/capacity.

Postings: You also use the D2 process to serve field workers who are facing issues or are in a period of major transition. What does this look like?

Ron: We began with people in transition as a way of confirming their decisions and with people we thought were struggling in mission and needed our help. Dealing with people who seem to be struggling has been difficult as you can imagine—more difficult than we expected. It can feel risky to have your local church step into your life and speak with a sense of conviction about what you are doing.

In some cases our discernment has not been received very well. People already engaged in service sometimes feel uncomfortable if their church asks to open a discussion about their work. In such cases, we have had to increase the amount of face-to-face interaction and field visits in order to build trust. The tools that we have developed have come as a result of a major concern to not mess up; we are dealing with people's lives and so we are taking this work seriously.

Postings: How do your efforts intersect with what agencies do to guide workers?

Ron: We have had two D2s where our efforts intersected very well with the mission agencies and where our discernment matched what the agency ultimately also determined as the best way forward. In other D2s, we found that the agency did not have enough time or staff to walk the journey with our people. And we realize this is our role as the local church. When done well, there ought to be alignment between the input of the local church and agency. We would welcome the participation of an agency staff member on a D2.

Watch one [D2 team member](#) describe how the process brought church, field worker, and agency together.

Postings: How do you determine who will serve on the D2?

Ron: We seek D2 team members who have jobs that involve hiring decisions and people management. This type of person can affirm wisely, and they have the skills to sit down face to face with people when a problem needs to be addressed. That does not mean that everyone on the D2 needs to have these skills, but in our experience, the group works best when we include people who make leadership decisions every day.

Individuals who see every issue as purely spiritual tend to struggle with objectively analyzing gifting and ministry matches. D2s are charged with the hard work of proving someone's fit. That involves looking for verifiable evidence of God's calling and equipping for a specific area of global service.



D2
Discern
Develop

The D2 team needs a strong leader who has great relational skills...filled with grace, as D2s often deal with a person's dream for their life.

Each D2 team needs to have a strong leader who has great relational skills. This leader needs to be able to keep the focus on the big picture and maintain the group's momentum. At the same time, the leader must be filled with grace as D2s often deal with a person's dreams for their life.

We have found great candidates among the professionals and leaders at North Park—talented people who are often otherwise underused. We recruit them one by one, explaining the process and its importance to our church. We let them know that this task will give them the privilege of

walking with a global worker or potential worker for a season—one of the highest privileges that anyone gets to do at our church. And we tell them that we want them to shoot straight. If the individual in the D2 process is not someone they would hire, we don't want to recommend them for missions!

Postings: Is there preparation/training for these people?

Ron: Not yet, but there will be over time. Topics like cross-cultural awareness and the history of missionary sending are coming up on our radar as training topics.

Postings: Is there a "Post D2" process?

Ron: We create an executive summary for the elders of North Park that outlines what happened, without giving away confidences. In some cases when it is a transition situation,

we may have the D2 members visit the elders to explain their findings.

Postings: How do you evaluate your results?

Ron: We have had to make sure that we don't evaluate our D2 work by the numbers that we mobilize and send. D2s aren't designed to send everyone who applies; they are designed to discern whom we should send and to develop better methods of sending and monitoring Kingdom work.

We are building a way of critiquing the process for each individual D2 (objective, thorough, timely, locally sound, generous, etc.) with the hope that we will get better at it. The path that we discern and the development that we recommend ought to result in people being stronger and more effective in life and ministry.

One way that we are evaluating the result right now is by the level of unity that we have as we develop our Discernment Statements. If there is unanimous discernment on a situation, then we want to trust it and move forward with humble confidence.

Postings: How could a church start implementing the D2 process?

Ron: Here's what I would suggest.

- As a missions team, take the time to reflect upon whether you want to move into a more systematic process for discernment. Clarify what you want to gain from such a process. Consider what are the risks of entering into people's lives in this new way. Identify what new capacity you will need to build to take this new direction. Without a clear commitment, you may find it difficult not to capitulate to various pressures or you may find yourself without the leadership energy to persevere.
- Make sure that key church leaders buy in. Don't attempt to inaugurate D2s unless the senior pastor and elders/deacons want to move in the direction of having a new process for discerning God's leading for who you send into global ministry. "Disciplined discernment" is just that—it is disciplined so it requires all parties to take seriously their role and its outcome. Engage a key elder and/or staff member as early as you can so that confidence can be built in the process.
- Select a D2 candidate and write out what it is that you are seeking to discern with this person. What set of activities and what circle of people can you pull together over what timeframe to accomplish your goal?

**D2
Discern
Develop**

**"Disciplined discernment"
...requires all parties to
take seriously their role and
its outcome.**

- Select four (we find four is an effective team size) people who have enough leadership experience and cultural wisdom to speak with honesty to this person and who will take the task of discernment seriously. We find it works best when one or two of the people have regular contact with the individual in some form where they can observe behavior/skills/accomplishments.

We are the Church; this is the stuff we are commissioned to do. We should not be delegating away the task of sending to agencies but working together with them and with the candidate

to truly know what God's best is for them.



For a list of D2 principles, download "[D2 Concepts: What we have learned so far.](#)" And don't miss our related blog, "[Loud Enough for Others to Hear.](#)"

Interchange Postings

Catalyst's *Postings* e-newsletter is a free, monthly publication of practical articles highlighting what churches and agencies are doing to mobilize untapped potential for global impact.

- * **SUBSCRIBE** at www.catalystservices.org/postings/.
- * **ACCESS** past *Postings* at www.catalystservices.org/postings-gallery-of-archives/.

© 2014 Catalyst Services, Inc.