

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



August 2024 | Vol. 19 | Issue 8

Integrating Discipleship and Missions

**Three leaders share
their perspectives**

Can a congregation effectively engage in missions if they aren't discipling their own people? Is it possible for a church to truly disciple their people without including meaningful missions involvement? Since most church leaders would agree that missions and discipleship are both essential and interconnected, then how do we successfully develop and integrate efforts to develop godly disciples with a heart for the world?

We asked three local church pastors deeply committed to both missions and discipleship to describe what that integration looks like in their congregation today.

IN THIS CONVERSATION



Rob Gast



Shannon
Libengood



Matthew
Phillip

Rob Gast has been on staff at **Creekside Church** in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, for 20 years, the last nine as pastor of welcoming and missions.

Shannon Libengood spent eight years in overseas missions prior to becoming missions director 13 years ago at her home church, **North Way Christian Community** in Pittsburgh, PA. Her responsibilities expanded, and today she is executive pastor of ministry at North Way. **Matthew Philip**, currently the global engagement lead at **Crossroads Christian Church** in Evansville, IN, has led local church missions programs for more than 15 years as well as having served on the leadership team for the Urbana Missions Conference. Catalyst recently convened this group virtually to discuss what they have learned about connecting discipleship and missions.

ELLEN: For our purpose here, we will consider as “missions” all aspects of your church’s outreach, both global and local. Since “discipleship” can mean many different things, let’s start by defining the term as it is used in your church before we launch into our discussion of what integration looks like in your context.

SHANNON: We describe discipleship as leading people to know, experience, and follow Jesus. “Knowing” Him is centered on the Word.

“Experiencing” Him is the relational connection in which the believer can hear God’s voice.

“Following” Him includes the missional piece of going, doing, and walking out that relationship.

MATTHEW: Currently in our church, the operating definition of discipleship is “being with God, being with others, and being sent.” We have an online formation/discipleship pathway, called “the roadmap,” that incorporates these three markers. This works well for the highly motivated individual learner. However, the lukewarm response of our congregation tells us we have more work to do.

Additional issues arise when we try to define “making disciples” which is often understood in our context to be primarily a human activity where people are responsible to develop a follower of Jesus and also take some level of responsibility for that person’s growth and formation. At the same time, other people discount the role of human agency because they believe God makes disciples through the agency of the Holy Spirit. This ambiguity impacts our model and our practice. Let’s just say, our church hasn’t fully arrived at clear definitions.

ROB: Similar to your church, Matthew, for us discipleship is an ongoing conversation. From our founding 35 years ago, our mission has been to help our congregation “follow Jesus, love God, and love people.” Following Jesus and loving God are obviously the personal discipleship pieces. Loving people is the practical working out of that missional side. Therefore, we try to create many opportunities for people to grow and to put what they learn into practice in the world around us. To use Saddleback’s terminology, we want to invite people to move from the *crowd* to the *curious*, to the

committed, to the core. And those core people are the spiritually mature disciples who are investing their lives in missional Kingdom work.

ELLEN: So it sounds like you all believe discipleship and missions should be well integrated in the life of the church. What does that look like?

ROB: Short-term missions is one logical place to see discipling take place. As we plan trips, we ask, “What is the discipleship value?” There’s huge potential, but that requires training team members. We have months of meetings, orientation, and preparation that is very much discipleship. In their short-term experience, we want them to grow deeper in their faith and their experience of God, and to become more missionally focused.

SHANNON: Like both of you, we have wrestled with these questions, but one thing that helped determine where we landed was the Lord’s challenge to us not to assume or presume anything about what our people knew or how well they were discipled—including our staff. We’ve now been on an eight- or nine-year journey of putting handles on what discipleship is and creating a clear discipling pathway. The Lord led us to a 10-week discipleship experience called *Rooted* that came out of Mariner’s Church. It deals with all the basic

elements of discipleship including things like daily devotions, repentance, prayer, generosity, worship, sharing their story, and serving the community.

The serving part is one of the places that we are able to integrate missions into this process because we emphasize crossing cultures—serving people who are different from them. Small groups develop out of the Rooted groups to maintain these rhythms of spiritual disciplines including the outreach component.

Before there is service or anything else, the foundation must be in place, namely the disciple has to be in personal relationship with Jesus and know how to hear His voice. Obedience then grows out of the heart. We fight compartmentalization that limits our spiritual life to Sunday, totally separate from what happens the rest of the week. Before our people focus on the world, they first need to see their workplace, their neighborhood, their grocery store as their mission field.

MATTHEW: That’s very helpful, Shannon. Earlier in my ministry, I had seen my role as the final runner in a relay race. I thought the prior runners had taken care of the conversion and formation parts—helping people establish spiritual rhythms, exercise gifts, engage in community, etc.—so that by the time they were “passed” to me, they were mature disciples ready for missions. That was just not reality; my entire paradigm had to change as I realized how few were active followers of Jesus, experiencing Him on a regular basis. We are getting better at integrating missional and formational practices as we engage our global and local outreach volunteers.

Another aspect of this challenge comes when churches differentiate missions as primarily global efforts and evangelism as something the church does locally. When that happens, missions can

"Before our people focus on the world, they first need to see their workplace, their neighborhood, their grocery store as their mission field."

appear to be something that peculiar, super-sanctified people do way out in the boonies. Missions people are given hero status because there's a general assumption that nobody else knows what to do or is willing to do it. So that distances missions, both local and global, from church-based discipleship and totally separates it from the lives of the people in our churches.

"We want to develop our people's concern for a lost world, but in our church we want to communicate right from day one when someone comes to faith that they now have a message to share."

ROB: There are unintended consequences of saying the mission field is just out there, of adopting that kind of compartmentalization. Yes, we want to develop our people's concern for a lost world, but in our church we want to communicate right from day one when someone comes to faith that they now have a message to share. Obviously there has to be some focus to the church's organized missions program, but we live in the global village. People are more aware that the world is right around them.

ELLEN: That's helpful. Looking at a bit different angle, how does this integration allow discipleship to impact your relationships with missionaries?

MATTHEW: Some of the deficiencies in missions grow out of the quality of people we are sending.

We can't just take people across the line of faith and let their spiritual roots remain merely an inch below the surface. The discipleship process must teach believers that Christianity is more than a therapeutic solution for their personal issues. When we send people into missions who have never counted the cost of discipleship or been distinctly shaped as Christ-followers or do not have a clear Kingdom perspective, the rest of the world wonders why we sent them.

SHANNON: As Matthew said earlier, missions has been siloed so that missionaries are those peculiar people who do super-human exploits instead of human beings not so different from you and me. Our partners despise that hero-on-the-pedestal model! They want to convey that yes, I'm doing what the Lord asks of me, but all of us should be walking out our obedience like that!

Each of our campuses now focuses on just one of our missionary partners because we want to expand

"When we send people into missions who have never counted the cost of discipleship or been distinctly shaped as Christ-followers or have a clear Kingdom perspective, the rest of the world wonders why we sent them."

our mutuality—intentional ways we benefit one another. Telling heroic stories may get attention but it also isolates missionaries from everyone else and gives our people permission to keep global needs at arm's length. Because we focus on just one global partner at each campus, there's no competition for time. Visiting partners have space to tell their more intimate stories and be real.

For instance, one of our workers told about how he was such a rebel as a child that he even got kicked out of fifth grade! That transparency humanized him for our people; they appreciated hearing that he had had a hard past. Another worker told how her missions interest was initiated as a young person when she engaged with people on the margin through local service outreaches.

We also want to resource our global workers to be more committed disciples. When many of them were here recently, we reserved one full day to share the **Freedom Prayer tool** that we have been finding useful in helping people break spiritual bondage. Mutuality in action!

ELLEN: One last question: What specific steps are you taking in this process of integrating discipleship and missions? What does that look like?

MATTHEW: I figured out that I have to change behaviors and practices, not just talk about theology or write a tidy little document. One change I have been implementing is shifting my team-building strategy. Instead of recruiting elders and other senior leaders for my team, I am inviting younger, emerging leaders who are already members of the worship team, the children's ministry, adult ministries, etc., to be a part of our global leadership team. As they taste missions, their passion develops, and they naturally begin to integrate missions into the other ministries they lead.

Another game changer for me was reframing my perception of my role from just directing global outreach to setting a priority on pastoring my global-outreach leaders. When I discovered that I couldn't assume my leadership team had been disciplined, we started to work on spiritual disciplines and learning how to experience God together. The impact has been amazing, so much so that now other people are looking to our global missions team members for spiritual formation leadership. I think we may have more influence in our church today for spiritual formation than for missions. This is where integration of missions and discipleship needs to start!

SHANNON: A key thing for us has been getting our lead pastor and campus pastors personally engaged, especially in taking trips overseas. Transformation happens on those trips, and then they can speak from their experience when they return. Giving them that exposure is a gift to the whole church because when they come back, they naturally begin to integrate missions into their teaching and discipling.

ROB: For everyone, missions experiences, whether global or local, provide the best context to put all of the spiritual disciplines into practice. It's life changing, especially for young people, when they experience for the first time seeing God answer prayer and watch things happen that clearly evidence His hand at work. This moves discipleship from a class to real-life experience!

We are in a new era, and I have faith that we will see another wave of missions passion. But it will have to be rooted in discipleship. As we take seriously our role of helping people to become committed followers of Christ, God's commission to "go" will be a natural step of obedience.

QUESTIONS TO LAUNCH A DISCUSSION WITH YOUR CHURCH STAFF AND/OR MISSIONS LEADERSHIP TEAM

1. How does our church define discipleship? Do we need a clearer definition that will help us become better disciple makers?
2. Have we been assuming too much about the spiritual maturity and serious commitment of our congregation? How could we more objectively assess our effectiveness in discipling them?
3. What is the most effective thing our missions program does to disciple our people? Is it sufficient?
4. How should we assess our own level of discipleship? Should we consider taking all of our leaders through some sort of discipling process to determine how we can all sharpen our practice of the spiritual disciplines and be better disciplers of others?
5. What could we do to enrich the spiritual practices of our global and local workers?

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 catalystservices.org/postings.
READ past *Postings* articles at catalystservices.org/postings-gallery-of-archives.