

Camarillo Serendipities

The Expected and Unexpected Characteristics
of an Intentional Disciple-Making Congregation

by Ralph Rittenhouse



Global Discipleship Initiative

Globaldi.org

Table of Contents

1 - Harmony and Unity	4
2 - Allocations of Time and Money	4
3 - Evangelism.....	5
4 - Generosity	6
5 - Global Vision	7
6 - Leadership Development and Leadership Pool.....	8
7 - Volunteerism	9
8 - True Transformation.....	10
9 - Multiplication	11
10 - Authentic Growth	13
11 - Obedience	14

Camarillo Serendipities

John Ortberg said, “We think of Christians as people who have got the heaven job done, while we think of discipleship as optional extra-credit work for spiritual overachievers.” After five years of using *Discipleship Essentials* in gender-specific *micro groups*, I observed a transformation turning our church into disciple-making culture. Along the way, I began to enumerate both the expected benefits as well as the surprises of this concerted effort. One of our fears from the beginning was that this focus would be just another program, transferring information only minimally applied—that there would be little actual life change. Not only did we see life change in individuals, but, corporately. As the micro groups multiplied and impacted a growing percentage of the church, the entire spiritual life in our congregation was changed from the inside out.

There is a huge difference in both personal versus corporate renewal. If you have personal renewal without the transformation of the values that shape the church environment, eventually the old value system will kill the renewal. But, if there is a new set of underlying values that support and sustain the disciple-making culture, then you have genuine transformation that creates forward momentum. A tipping point is reached when the people of the church know that the reason the church exists to make disciples, and in our church, this began to happen. The result was a positive peer pressure to be in on the church’s mission with the micro group as the fundamental unit.

I am excited to share that these eleven underlying values, qualities and practices emerged quite naturally as the micro groups moved year to year, from 4 to 16 to 35 to 85 and to 130. (I say naturally, but it was not without challenges. These are not in any particular order. You will read later about the “Sinkholes and Potholes” that can disrupt your disciple-making efforts.) As I said, some of these qualities of discipleship were anticipated and others were pleasant surprises I call “serendipities.”

Camarillo Serendipities

1 - Harmony and Unity

We had not targeted or expected this valuable result. Because of the personal profit and development of spiritual disciplines, the involvement in quads became our norm. All staff and primary leaders were in discipleship groups. The great majority of the church was enjoying regular individual time in God's Word, memorization of scripture and deeper personal friendships. Of course, not everyone was catching the vision and practice at the same pace, yet we were moving toward being on the same page. Some were late adopters, recognizing that this was different. Some came after their high school children got involved! Others caught the vision that this was not "just another program" but a lifestyle change to be disciples who made disciples.

Since we were using a common foundational curriculum in *Discipleship Essentials*, we formed a shared language. Points of theology, that could have been contentious, were clarified and harmonized. What is often true in many churches is that there are major gaps or holes in the foundations of peoples' faith. Significant building blocks are missing. By adopting a curriculum that covered the core theological truths, we were able to assure that we addressed the foundational "essentials" upon which to build our faith. Since we had a shared "playbook, people could discuss where they were in the discipleship journey with a common language. For example, we could speak to each other about our experience of grace through the impact of the story of the prodigal son (Chapter 10), or how the doctrine of adoption as God's beloved, served to shape their identity (Chapter 13).

2 - Allocations of Time and Money

Budget time may be an opportunity for dangerous contention. When disciple-making began to be recognized as our primary objective, this became the standard for every proposed activity. The question was always, "How does this help us make disciples?" This new standard helped us eliminate many unproductive ventures and involvements.



Camarillo Serendipities

We also re-evaluated our priorities of where to spend our time. By 2014, our primary Christmas program organizer challenged me after I presented an elaborate plan for that year. She had been in a micro group since 2012 and knew how much time, effort, and expense was involved in the annual production. With so many in micro groups, she “cancelled Christmas” so that the focus could be continued instead of taking three months out of many people’s schedules to “put on a Christmas program.” Looking back, many were relieved that they could continue their micro groups and not have to lose momentum.

3 - Evangelism

This was another unexpected serendipity. Because of the healthy life change and inner joy people were experiencing, sharing came naturally with each other, in their families, at work or at school. With no special programs, campaigns or intentionality, people talked about what they were learning and the growth they were finding. People recognized opportunities to speak about spiritual matters and concerns with friends and colleagues. They excitedly shared their own growth experiences and what they were learning about God. We had several men’s quads meeting at Denny’s on Friday mornings. The waitress got so used to the men asking her about her life and family, she would often stop and announce to the entire group of tables her prayer needs. Eventually, she started attending our church.

One of the concerns that came up in the Camarillo Story was closing the back door. We had been growing consistently, and then we stopped. Then we started losing people. Once the number of discipleship quads began to multiply, relational bonds in the congregation also multiplied. The Apostle John said, “Dear children, let’s not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions” (I John 3:18). Point Mugu Naval Air Station, near our church, sends men out to sea for months at a time. Navy wives and children are left behind. Our congregation began to make concerted efforts to support these wives and children. One seaman almost lost his marriage, because of the separation. But, his discipleship quad wouldn’t let that happen. They worked with him and his wife to renew the marriage commitment. When one ship



Camarillo Serendipities

was at sea during Christmas, our church sent gifts to the men on board. The base commander attended one of our services and gave a public “Thank you” to the congregation.

Bonds of love closed the back door. Families who had left our church began to return. When I retired and left the area, the church, without a senior pastor, continued to grow.

4 - Generosity

Lesson 25 in *Discipleship Essentials* is about giving. Open discussion often takes place here with people sharing their own positive stories of giving. This frequently results in decisions to become more involved in financial support of the church. One man in my group confessed that he had never tithed, but now, planned to start, and did.

A leader of a mission effort in Romania visited our church to thank our people for personal and financial support. One of our quad members suggested that our disciple-making initiative might work in Romania. She agreed and promised to invite Romanian pastors that she knew, to come to the United States to learn how to use *Discipleship Essentials* in their churches. Eleven Romanian pastors agreed to come. Two more came from Friesland.

I remember the Sunday morning I slipped out of bed to my knees to nervously pray. This was the morning I planned to ask the congregation for \$45,000 in unbudgeted funds, to pay for the tickets and the conference. I’d never asked our people for a sum like that without warning. I had promised the pastors in Romania that we would pay all their expenses. In two weeks all the money had been pledged. The only explanation for such generosity was that our people had grown to understand how important disciple-making was.

Two years later when we decided to host a global summit for disciple-making, we needed an estimated \$85,000. I asked again, and again, in two weeks the entire sum was pledged. But, when the congregation had given that amount, they continued to give. Though I didn’t know it, the conference would end up costing \$112,000, and their giving covered the full amount.

Both times, when we decided to offer training in disciple-making to international pastors, inviting them to come to America at our expense, the people of our congregation generously



Camarillo Serendipities

funded the projects. They opened their checkbooks, they opened their homes, and they opened their hearts. All the conference attendees stayed in the homes of our people. They were fed by our people, welcomed by our people, and loved by our people.

Our church had seen the results of this training in their own lives, and they joyfully became involved in supporting the effort to train others. When we received invitations to go overseas and offer disciple-making training in other countries, the people of our congregation gave financially to assist those who were willing to go. That same year, 2014, we decided we would make an effort to finish paying off our multi-million dollar building loan. Again, the funds came generously. All these funds were in excess of our regularly budgeted expenditures.

Our congregation did not know it, but I was planning to retire when I turned 70 years old, in the summer of 2015. It was my joy to know that when I retired, I left the church debt free.

5 - Global Vision

Our circle of influence first began to be enlarged locally. We began to get inquiries from other pastors in town. Their congregants were talking to them about what was going on at our church. We received invitations to come and share what we were doing with their leadership. One pastor from a Calvary Chapel church in a neighboring community called and asked us to come speak to his men's meeting about discipleship. They had a breakfast with almost a hundred men. I took several of the men from our church. They shared their quad experiences, and I shared how our quad ministry had begun. That morning several men's quads were started at that Calvary Chapel, and later their women got started as well.

There was a jump from seeing a vision for multiplying disciples in our community, to multiplying disciples internationally. It happened with no planning or expectation on our part. Our congregation in Southern California is very ethnically diverse. One Sunday I was teaching about Christ's Great Commission. I wanted to illustrate Christ's vision for reaching the world. So, I asked people from our congregation who came from other countries to come to the front



Camarillo Serendipities

and read scripture in their native language. That morning in 2014 we had 21 different countries represented.

Because many members of our congregation had ethnic roots or relatives in other countries, they easily saw the potential for multiplication elsewhere. Some took materials with them when they went on trips. They mailed books to friends and relatives in other countries. One woman, on vacation back to Malaysia, went to several churches and a seminary, inviting people to come to our international disciple-making summit. Thirteen people from Malaysia attended what we called the Global Discipleship Summit (GDS) in August 2015.

Our Vietnamese members launched the effort, and funded the translation of *Discipleship Essentials* into Vietnamese. When I shared with the congregation that we had been invited to take our disciple-making training to churches in Romania, 13 people signed up and paid their own way to go. We were able hold three-day seminars in two churches and speak in over a dozen churches on the weekend. The response was overwhelming. Most of the Romanian people had Bibles, but almost none had seen a disciple-making materials nor methods. The people of our congregation continue to correspond and encourage believers they have met through our international disciple-making efforts.

As a result of our Global Discipleship Summit we are continuing to see fruit in Romania, Nepal, Philippines, Mozambique, Malaysia, China, Viet Nam and India. We are trying to cast a vision that the model churches in the United States will become not only local training centers, but also adopt the multiplying disciple-making efforts in other countries.

6 - Leadership Development and Leadership Pool

The fifth point of the discipleship covenant that we sign before starting *Discipleship Essentials*, requires a commitment to the possibility of leading a discipleship group at the completion of the curriculum. This possibility of leadership motivates praying and preparing for this role. When people complete the initial curriculum, they are encouraged to follow through



Camarillo Serendipities

with that commitment. While in the group, they develop the skills needed, and are then coached by their original group leader.

One of the most important results of the multiplying discipleship groups is that people assume the responsibility of initiating and leading their own group. One of the fatal flaws in the consumer-oriented American church is that it creates a built-in passivity. People come to the church to *get*, to be inspired by a preacher or maybe a class, so that they can get through another week. The best description I have heard for this passivity is that people “sit, soak, and sour.”

What if there were a simple way to lift people out of their passivity to activate their momentum in the direction for being reproducing disciples of Jesus? We are proposing that this one act of completing and then originating one’s own *micro group* could change not only an individual but the entire mindset of a congregation. After Dr. Greg Ogden visited Camarillo Community Church he said, “I was impressed by the energy level. People were excited about the way that the Lord had used them in leading their own groups and the impact this was having on the people in their groups.” *We cannot underestimate the power of this transformative shift in the way Christians conduct themselves.* My first quad consisted of two elders and a layman, a layman who didn’t think he had time to be an elder. After we finished the quad, he started his own quad and became an elder.

Two men from one of my quads launched a new once-a-month “Dads and Sons” ministry. They played games appropriate for dads and sons. They brought in special speakers to help dads know how to build character. They were even successful in getting other churches in town to participate with them.

7 - Volunteerism

Difficulty finding church volunteers indicates a deficit of discipleship. We found that our disciple-making quads became our prime source of ministry volunteers. The deeper relationship to Christ and other believers fostered a strong commitment to assisting church ministry. Instead of burned-out volunteers, we saw fired-up volunteers. We saw quad members developing new



Camarillo Serendipities

ministries and stepping up to greater and more challenging roles. One couple who at first didn't think they had time to be in a disciple-making quad, began to lead several quads at the same time. At our January staff planning retreat we would take time to reflect on the accomplishments of the past year before jumping into planning the new year. I asked the staff where most of their new volunteers were coming from. After a few minutes of consideration, the response was unanimous. They were coming from our disciple-making quads.

One of the surprising outcomes of the multiplying discipleship groups was that *my* workload went down. With more motivated volunteers, I was freed to give myself more strategically to multiplying disciples. During the 4th and 5th year of our disciple-making initiative, I literally felt my load getting lighter.

When the Chairman of our Board of Elders experienced a heart event and was taken to the local emergency room, I went to visit him. When I arrived, the nurse wouldn't let me in to see him.

“But I'm his pastor,” I protested.

“Well,” she responded, “He left of list of those who would be allowed to come in to see him, and you're not on the list.”

When she told me the names, they were the men in his quad. As I walked away, a bit stunned, I realized this is what it means to return the ministry of God back over to the people of God.

8 - True Transformation

I am sometimes asked, when we teach seminars on disciplemaking, if there is a way to measure authentic spiritual growth. That is a difficult question, and the people in the best position to answer are the people themselves. We always try to bring with us, to those teaching events, actual quad members who share their own personal experiences. But, from an outside perspective, the best measurement I'm able to offer is the development of valued spiritual habits.



Camarillo Serendipities

The basic discipleship curriculum of *Discipleship Essentials* usually takes at least a year to complete, and in my opinion, one to two years is crucial to effect lasting life change. Often we spend about 2 weeks per chapter. Here are some of the indicators authentic growth I have seen:

- Consistent time in God's Word, studying, not just perusing;
- Scripture memory that involves meditation;
- Persistent prayer, praying for the others in the group;
- Ministry participation, outside the group;
- Active witnessing, sharing their own personal story of spiritual growth;
- Joyful generosity, sharing from their own energy, resources and time.

Yes, I maintain you can expect and will see true transformation. These multiplied blessings impacted our whole church.

9 - Multiplication

When I teach in our Disciple-Making Intensives, I often begin by asking the question, "What was Christ's last command to his followers?" Most quickly respond, reciting what we call The Great Commission.

Matthew 28: 18-19 (NLT) *"Jesus came and told His disciples, 'I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'"*

Matthew 28: 18-20 (NLT)



Camarillo Serendipities

Then I ask, “Can you name any of His disciples?” They respond by naming a half dozen or more. My final question is, “Can you name any of *your* disciples?” I rarely get much of an answer if any at all. If someone had asked me that question before I began this intentional disciple-making initiative, I would have been similarly speechless. I might have stumbled around and named a few people that I might have affected. But intentionally making disciples who will ultimately make disciples? That was not in my thoughts.

One of the great benefits of *Discipleship Essentials* is the emphasis on multiplication. It starts when the group signs the covenant when beginning together. Usually, there is a sense that they are making a covenant, both to each other, and before God. Signing it together is saying, “I’m serious.”

At the end of Chapter 1, there is a multiplication chart that demonstrates mathematically the critical difference between addition and multiplication. Why did Jesus, the best preacher in the world, spend the majority of his time with twelve men, instead of the crowds? He obviously knew that the best way to reach the masses was to disciple a few, and of course, teach them to become disciplemakers.

At the end of Chapter 8, the group is asked to review the covenant, reemphasizing the commitment to the end objective—to become disciplemakers. Again, after Chapter 16, the covenant is revisited.

Chapter 24 is titled *Sharing the Wealth* and is built off of Paul’s instructions to Timothy.

“You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others.” 2 Timothy 2:2 (NLT)

This chapter, like the first chapter, strongly reinforces Christ’s model of making disciples who will make disciples.

By this time, members of the group have already begun to pray about and have potential disciples in mind. The best method I have found is to encourage launching new groups before the



Camarillo Serendipities

end of the original group or immediately after. Too much lag time in between groups increases the potential of losing momentum. What I have been most impressed with is that the majority of quad members, by the time they finish the group, actually go on to launch new groups. The strong relational component of these groups make them exciting. Before long, as the word got out, people were asking to be in groups.

One of my original quad members was ex-military. He found his quad members among servicemen at the nearby military base. One was an F-18 Squadron Commander. The Squadron Commander's next assignment was the Pentagon. Soon we received news that there was a new disciple-making quad in the Pentagon.

10 - Authentic Growth

I am often asked if this disciple-making emphasis made our church grow. Authentic spiritual growth is a valid question. Numerical growth, however, is too often what pastors are looking for. If numerical growth is what you are after, there are probably faster ways to get people in the seats. On the other hand, these micro groups are the best way I have found to insure authentic spiritual growth.

Small groups have their place, but up until we began the micro group strategy, we saw limited results. Part of the problem is that when a small group gets to ten people (often considered a healthy small group size), people hide. You can come and say almost nothing and that is ok. If the group discussion lasts 60 minutes, that is six minutes apiece. Some people could never be limited to six minutes, which means others will have little or no time to speak.

When couples are involved, often one is the mouthpiece. It doesn't matter who the question is directed to, the mouthpiece answers. If you ask him a question, she answers. Or, if he is the mouthpiece, and you ask her a question, he answers.

Small groups are most often mixed genders. There are many topics not at all suited for gender-mixed groups. Gender-specific groups, however, insure the opportunity to talk openly about many needed topics. You can share personal concerns and struggles more readily.



Camarillo Serendipities

Another advantage of the *Discipleship Essential's* groups is that everyone is required to do homework. Each person needs to spend time with God in His Word. They come, most often having learned things from the Holy Spirit, and they are anxious to share their answers. The high accountability of the micro group insures rich learning experiences. And, having to articulate your answers to the rest of the group, accelerates your retention of new knowledge.

I used to think that, as a pastor, my job was to build God's church. If it grew numerically, I felt good. If it was not growing numerically, I felt like it was my fault. Then I reread Matthew 16:18 where Jesus said, "I will build my church." It dawned on me that Jesus had never asked me to build His church! In fact, He never asked anyone to build His church. He asked us to make disciples, and He said He would build His church. If I do my job, making disciples, I can trust Him to do His job, building His church.

11 - Obedience

"I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. Matthew 28: 18-19 (NLT)

To be fully obedient to all the commands He has given us, we must obey the last one, to make disciples. If a Christ-follower is not intentionally making disciples, he's really not following fully. *Discipleship Essentials* is filled with instructions for authentic followers, and none more important than reproducing other disciples.

Daryl, one of our staff guys, walked out of his office and announced, "I feel so global!" He was working on preparations for our second international disciple-making training. Initially, when we started our first disciple-making experiment, we weren't even sure that it was going to work. Four quads turned into sixteen, then sixteen into 35, and the multiplication continued. Then suddenly, with little forethought or planning, this movement jumped overseas, and we were involved in making disciples in Romania and Holland. Now, we were planning a Global



Camarillo Serendipities

Discipleship Summit that would offer training to international guests for 15 other countries. By this time, we were all feeling “global.”

I can't help but believe that Jesus saw these opportunities over 2000 years ago, when he commissioned that group gathered on the hillside in Galilee. Most of them had probably never traveled outside their tiny little country and many never would. But, their faithfulness to pass on Jesus' teachings to the next generation resulted in us being Christ-followers today. And today, going into all the world is a real possibility. If you use the list of recognized nations published by the State Department of the United States of America, there are 196 countries in the world today. If only a small number of churches in the USA decide to become fully obedient, could we not see the Great Commission fulfilled in our generation?

