Disciples Forming Other Disciples
By Kristi Scheerbaum

The Need in the Church
Discipleship is a word that many only partially understand. If people are familiar with the word, they will usually define it as being a follower of Jesus. The problem is very few will see that discipleship also encompasses being a disciple-maker. In responding to the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19–20, we are called not only to follow Jesus and all that he teaches but also to go and make other disciples.

Understood in this way, discipleship solves many of the challenges we see in the Church today. Authentic community results from disciples making other disciples, because in order to form other people, you must be in a relationship with them. Our church communities frequently suffer from a scarcity of interpersonal, vulnerable, intimate relationships. Without these types of relationships, loneliness ensues, which then brings with it a temptation to cover up the pain of isolation through a variety of sins. The Church needs followers of Jesus who are willing to invest their time and vulnerability in relationships with others and teach them how to follow Jesus.

Although some people are willing to share their faith with others in a casual environment, many of them do not know how to start an intentional discipling relationship with another person. They may get past the basics of sharing that they are Catholic, but then what do they do next? The Church needs clear processes to help the average parishioner respond to the call of discipleship—processes that will help them grow in their own faith and give them the confidence and structure to share their faith with others. While there are a plethora of organizations and programs inspiring people to develop a closer relationship with Christ, they may not necessarily inspire the same people to share that relationship with others. Simply giving people a particular book, showing them a video, or sending them to a conference won’t accomplish this.

For example, the organizers of the “Steubenville Conferences,” which help nearly 60,000 teens and adults throughout North America to encounter Christ each year, believe that the conversion experience of participants at a single conference needs to be followed through on a parish level. Even the most joy-filled Catholics need help with this next step of discipleship. In 2017, the Christian Outreach Office at Franciscan University of Steubenville embarked on a year-long research project to determine a discipleship model that results in forming disciples who are also disciple makers (spiritual multiplication). This article will share with you their findings and propose a specific model of two-fold discipleship. (Spoiler alert: it’s Jesus’ very own method.)

The Research
The study examined best practices from both Catholic and Protestant organizations, in order to find a model that resulted in spiritual multiplication, not just in the short term but substantively proven over a period of time. The goal was to find something that could be used on a parish level or by an individual who wanted to go home after a conversion experience at a conference and start growing and sharing.

Being a popular topic across many denominations, there are a lot of people doing good work in discipleship. But most of those researched had not yet figured out how to keep the momentum going to generate real spiritual multiplication, that is a disciple teaching a disciple how to make another disciple. Within the Catholic Church, college campuses with discipleship models are demonstrating the most success today, more so than in parishes.

The research concluded that a successful model, proven over time, does not exist in a non-campus environment within the Catholic Church. This does not mean that there are not some very good things happening in Catholic communities within specific dioceses (e.g. bible studies, small faith sharing groups, conferences with dynamic speakers, even online course offerings), but none of the programs examined in a parish environment were found to have resulted in spiritual multiplication over a long period of time.
A Model That Works
The second phase of research revealed a model of discipleship that utilizes micro groups (3 to 4 people) and intentionally creates a culture of expectation of reproduction within the process. The results were overwhelmingly better than any other approach, and not surprising considering micro group discipling is rooted in Jesus’ example of ministry where he discipled closely the Apostles Peter, James, and John.

Over 35 years ago, Greg Ogden discovered the powerful potential of micro groups while completing his Doctor of Ministry degree. Although he originally believed the way to make disciples was the one-on-one model demonstrated by Paul and Timothy in the New Testament, his advisor suggested that he consider a variety of other models. He did so, testing the micro group of 3-4 people, one-on-one disciplship, and small groups of 6-10. He discovered that the environment created with 3-4 people provided for a powerful “hothouse” of growth that was not present in the one-on-one model or a traditionally-sized small group. He documented all of this in his book, Transforming Discipleship.¹

The fruits of the micro group have been substantiated for over three decades, with approximately 60% of those participating in the micro group disciplship process continuing on to develop their own groups and, therefore, generating a process of spiritual multiplication.

Some non-denominational churches had similar results using the small group model (i.e. 6-8+), but their success depended on a small group culture being central to their church’s life, and such a culture does not exist in most Catholic parishes.

Characteristics of the Micro Group
One benefit of this process is that it can be done within a variety of contexts. It does not depend on strong parish support, as many of the other successful small group models do. This micro group process has also proven to work well in the lives of people with full-time jobs, families, and a host of other responsibilities. It’s a model of spiritual multiplication that works within the context of the average person’s life, empowering him or her to disciple others.

Ogden has identified five points that indicate why micro groups are effective:

I have come to see groups of three or four as the optimum setting for making disciples. Why do I believe that a triad or quad to be superior to one-on-one?

1. The one on one sets up a teacher-student dynamic. The pressure is upon the discipler to be the answer person or the fountain of all wisdom and insight. When a third person is added, the dynamic shifts to a group process. The discipler can more naturally make his or her contribution in the dynamic of group interchange.
2. Triad discipling (micro groups) shifts the model from hierarchical to relational. The greatest factor inhibiting those who are being discipled to disciple others (spiritual multiplication) is the dependency fostered by one on one relationships. The triad/quad, on the other hand, views disciplship as a come alongside relationship of mutual journey toward maturity in Christ. The hierarchical dimension is minimized.
3. The most startling difference between one on one and threes or fours is the sense of “groupness”. The sense of the Holy Spirit’s being present in our midst occurred must more often in the group versus the one on one.
4. There is wisdom in number. The group approach multiplies the perspectives on Scripture and application to life issues, whereas one on one limits the models and experience. By adding at least a third person there is another perspective brought to the learning process. The group members serve as teachers of one another.
5. Finally, and not to be minimized, by adding a third or fourth person who is being equipped to disciple others, the multiplication process is geometrically increased.

If three is better than two, why isn’t ten better than three? The larger the group, the more you water down the essential elements that make for transformation.

1. Truth - learning occurs in direct proportion to the ability to interact with the truth, which becomes more difficult with an increased number of voices contributing. It also becomes increasingly difficult to tailor the rate of learning to the individual, the larger the size of the group.
2. Transparent relationships - self-disclosure is integral to transformation, and openness becomes increasingly difficult in direct proportion to the size of the group. If we are not free to divulge our struggles, then the Spirit will not be able to use the group members to effectively minister at the point of need.
3. Mutual accountability - the larger the group, the easier it is to hide. Accountability requires the ability to check to see if assignments were completed, or commitments to obedience were maintained. Greater numbers decrease access to a person’s life.²

Discipleship Quad Development
After studying Ogden’s methodology and process, and then consulting with him personally to determine the
essential elements of two-fold discipleship, the Christian Outreach Office at Franciscan University developed a process called Discipleship Quads. We will now explore its essential elements.

**Formation through Content**

According to Ogden, the micro group process is the container and the curriculum is the content to the container. Therefore, the process can be used with a variety of different curricula. One of Ogden’s books, *Discipleship Essentials*, includes his particular curriculum for micro groups. After consulting this book, as well as specifically Catholic discipleship resources, the Christian Outreach Office created its own discipleship curriculum that is rooted in Catholic teaching and geared toward the structure and process of Ogden’s ideas. This curriculum begins with the *kerygma* (the basic proclamation of the essential glad tidings of Christianity) and then goes into the disciplines of a disciple, concluding with the call to go forth and share the faith with others in a discipling relationship. The content focuses on forming disciples through catechetical content, practical application, self-assessment, and accountability.

The length of the study is another element of the micro group that makes it effective. In following Ogden’s plan, groups typically take about 12 months to complete the curriculum. The time spent together is important because it provides the required time to develop intimacy with others, as well as provide the opportunity for a long intellectual and spiritual soak in the transforming power of the content within the curriculum.

**Prayerful Invitation**

Once a person has decided he or she wants to start a group (as the coordinator), the next step is to pray. Ogden suggests a process that begins with asking God to place the names of the people you are to invite on your heart. Consider writing a list of all the names that come to mind and then spending time praying with that list to ask God to pick out the specific three people you are to invite. The fruits of this prayerful process of inviting others is powerful, as it gives God the ability to lead the coordinator to unexpected people and prepare their hearts and minds for what God has in store for them.

**Intentionality of Spiritual Multiplication from the Outset**

“The covenant” is also an important element of the Discipleship Quad process. Upon inviting others to be a part of the Quad, they receive a written covenant, which details five points that they are asked to agree to when committing to the group. One of these points is that they would give serious consideration to continuing the discipleship chain by committing to invest in other people for another year following the completion of the group. Therefore, the expectation and intention of reproducing the groups is made clear from the beginning. Also, within the process, the group comes back to the points in the covenant at various times to keep reminding the members of what they have committed to and to start discussing and praying for those they will invite to be a part of a new group in the future. This creates a cultural expectation of reproduction.

**Rotation of Facilitation**

Some people are intimidated by the idea of leading or coordinating a group of people in a discipling relationship. In order to address this insecurity, Ogden included within the process an opportunity for each member of the group to take a turn leading the discussion. Therefore, upon completion of their time together, each person has experience leading, which empowers them and minimizes the fears associated with going forth to lead their own groups.

**Genuine Fellowship**

With a group size of four people, genuine fellowship and vulnerability comes very easily. At the first two meetings, the members share their spiritual journeys by following an outline to reflect on what God has done in each of their lives up to this point, thereby creating a foundation for discussing the rest of the curriculum. Having no more than four people in the discussion is important, because it provides enough people to increase accountability and fellowship but not so many people that intimacy would be lacking.

**Conclusion**

Now, more than ever, the Church needs people to commit to living a life of discipleship in the fullest sense of the word. The approach of micro groups or discipleship quads answers this need by providing an easy to follow format for individuals to grow in their own faith and become a disciple makers themselves.

Kristi Scheerbaum works as a consultant to Franciscan University of Steubenville’s Christian Outreach Office after serving on the team for 9 years. For information on Discipleship Quads, email discipleship@franciscan.edu or visit https://steubenvilleconferences.com/discipleship-quads.

**Notes**

3 https://steubenvilleconferences.com/discipleship-quads/