

Making Disciples Like a Rancher

Good morning, I'm Mark Elliott and I have been a member of LifeSpring Church since 2001 when my wife Donna and I moved to Bellevue. We came here after I accepted the position of Director of Missions for Eastern Nebraska Baptist Association. Last month I completed my 22nd year as a DoM and I am often asked, "What's that?" Well it might be better referred to as an area missionary or regional strategist. I serve as a church consultant, church starting catalyst, and as a pastor to pastors. We also have the privilege of hosting a LifeGroup in our home on Wednesday night.

To help you understand the background I bring for the analogy I am going to share, let me tell you a little more about myself. I was born and raised in northeastern Wyoming and grew up in and around the livestock industry. At the age of 16 my family moved to northeast Oklahoma where over the next 20 years I graduated high school as an active member of the Future Farmers of America, served as a state-vice president for the FFA, received a BS in Agricultural Economics from OSU, was involved in the farm equipment business, and in production agriculture—we did both crops and cattle.

At a recent pastors meeting I shared an analogy from the world of agriculture that spoke directly to why some churches are more effective at making disciples than others. Pastor Steve asked me to share that analogy with you. I thought about putting on blue jeans, my western belt and buckle, a western shirt, and hat to bring my analogy to life, but I didn't. You'll just have to use your imagination.

The short version of the analogy is that healthy disciple making churches function like cow calf operations while churches who struggle in that process function more like a feedlot operation. The longer version goes like this:

1. Although both are in the cattle business, they have very different purposes:

- A Cow Calf operator's goal is to double his herd every year—although doubling is almost impossible because unlike the sheep business where you often get twins and triplets, or the pork industry where large litters are common, twins are extremely rare in the cattle business. So a reproduction rate north of 90% is viewed as good and is actually required over time if a rancher plans to stay in business. A quick side bar: we call a church in America that is reproducing at a 10% rate healthy.
- A Feedlot operator's goal is to make the cattle he has fatter while he minimizes losses. That's it, just make them fatter.

2. Cow Calf Operators tend to be more “on the job trained” Practitioners; while Feedlot Operators are often formally trained Professionals

- For example, I grew up around a slug of aunts and uncles and cousins, because my dad was the 13th of 13 children. I have four first cousins who stayed on the ranch and made a good living—but only one got a college education. But lest you think they are a bunch of country bumpkins, let me share one illustration. I had the opportunity a few years ago to help one cousin with his fall roundup. That involves gathering the herd off the summer mountain pastures. When we had them corralled and ready to load, he had the state brand inspector on site, because the calves were not being shipped back to the ranch, but they were being shipped directly to the buyer who purchased the cattle after viewing them on the internet. The AG industry is pretty high tech.
- Contrast that with a feedlot where a professional manager oversees the operation. An operation that will include an on staff veterinarian and a feed nutritionist. The only real OJT positions will be the wranglers who ride the pens, and cut out sick livestock so they can be treated by the vet.

3. A third difference is in the day-to-day care that the cattle require
 - A cow calf operator works hard at creating self-feeders: his job is to make sure the cattle are in a pasture with sufficient grass and water, and in parts of Wyoming that pasture might be large since it can take 40 or 50 acres per cow/calf. As “hands off” as that sounds, a good rancher does check the cattle on a regular basis during the grazing season. He will also move them from pasture to pasture to make sure there is plenty of fresh grass. But during times of need, the rancher will be there big time. During calving season he will provide daily care—especially for those first calf heifers. In fact, first calf heifers get some special attention—kind of like the attention a new believer needs. During the winter or during a drought, he is there with hay and feed supplements as needed. Kind of like our LifeGroup was there for us when Donna was in the hospital.
 - By contrast, a feedlot operator has to provide daily care: the cattle are confined and all the food and water is brought to them. Water is available 24/7 while the feed is brought to them twice a day. If all the equipment broke down at once, the cattle wouldn’t get fed, because the system isn’t designed for them to be self-feeders. You might ask, why don’t they just keep food in front of them 24/7 like they do water. The answer is they would eat too much of the high energy feed and a disease called foundering would set in.
4. Finally, and I really, really, really don’t want to share this one with you, but here it is. A cow calf operator doesn’t have to shovel near as much manure.
 - It only accumulates during winter-feeding when the cattle are in a smaller pasture or using loafing sheds to get out of the weather. The rest of the year, the cattle are self-spreaders.
 - Feedlot operations are a confinement setting where the waste has to be removed on a regular basis.

- The one area of church life that I have spent more time on than any other single area over the last 22 years has been in the area of helping churches in times of conflict—dealing with the smelly problems of church life. What I have discovered is churches that function as cow calf operators have far less conflict than those who function like feedlot operations. That's because their members tend to be focused outward on fulfilling the mandate to be disciple makers.
- Churches who function like feedlots, tend to have the perspective that disciple making happens only in a church building. They end up accumulating church members in a confined area where their focus is on getting themselves fatter spiritually. As such, they tend to sit, soak, and sour losing track of why God has called them.

There are some other points I would like to make, but I've probably pushed the analogy as far as it needs to go. Bottom line is, God calls us to salvation through Jesus Christ, equips us for service through the Holy Spirit, and expects us to grow spiritually and to help others to know Him and grow in Him. We need to be multiplying our heard and with only a few churches at a 10% rate of growth we are losing the battle. Let's go and make disciples—let's act like ranchers.