

Real Life Discipleship

Jim Putman

Summary by Mark R. Elliott*

Introduction

1. Jim opens with the story of a conversation he had in a grocery store with a minister who had given up on the church—at least on organized religion. The guy had a Bible college and seminary degree and years of ministry experience, but was now involved in the organic (house) church movement. Jim comments, "Organization by itself is not the problem. And because it is not the problem, moving to an unorganized church model will not be the solution. So where did the church go wrong and what is the solution if not the trend toward the 'organic' church movement? The solution, I believe, is to create a clear and uncomplicated way to train disciples to make disciples...At Real Life Ministries, our overriding goal is to train disciples who know how to disciple others." (11)

- How often do you encounter people who have given up on the church?
- Are some of their complaints legitimate? If so, which ones and why?
- To what extent do you agree with Jim when he says, "organization itself is not the church's problem?"
- As you honestly evaluate your focus in ministry, what would you say is your "overriding goal?" Your church's "overriding goal?"

Part 1: Setting the Stage for Discipleship

Chapter 1: How do we create churches that succeed?

2. "In *Church as a Team Sport*, [Jim's first book] I said the difference between a high school coach and a college coach is that a college coach travels all over the country seeking proven athletes but that a high school coach has to identify and develop his own players....Every time a church hires from the outside, it reinforces to its people that they cannot become what is needed for their own church to succeed." (18)

- As you look at your leadership team, who was "brought in from the outside" and who was developed from within?
- Are you functioning today more like a high school or a college coach as it relates to developing or finding leadership? Why?
- If you knew that you had to win with the players you have (the current members of your church), would you change the way you currently equip/disciple your members? If so, what would you change?

3. "The discipleship process Jesus modeled was essential to His plan to reach the world. In John 17:3-4, Jesus said, 'This is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought You glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.' It is not surprising to me *that* Jesus made this claim that His work was finished, it is *when* He said it that is worth commenting on. In

this passage, Jesus claims that His work was done, even though He had not gone to the cross. As believers we know that His primary purpose for coming to earth was to pay for the sins of all who would accept His grace through faith. The cross is clearly central to His mission. However, this passage reveals something else. Jesus is praying to the Father before the crucifixion and the resurrection. He says here that He has completed something. Completed what? I believe He was talking about having completed the training of His twelve disciples. He was ready to release them into the world to make disciples themselves." (20)

- Take time to read and reflect on John 17 with Jim's exegetical thoughts in mind.
- Is Jim looking for a proof text to go with his passion, or does he have a legitimate point? Why do you say that?
- If Jim is right about this passage and he is right when he says "Discipleship is so much more than just sharing the news about Jesus; it is also about teaching people to obey the commands Jesus gave us" (21), what does that mean to you and how would that change the way your church views discipleship?

4. Reflect on the following statements and then answer the questions below.

"Without relationship between believers, there is no model to follow, no authenticity, no accountability, no application, and no support for the journey. These things come through personal contacts. And because that relational context for learning is lacking, life change is much rarer than it should be among Christians today." (22-23)

"If we are spiritually immature and act like spiritual brats, why would unbelievers want to hang out with us in the church? They can find enough drama in their own lives without joining our drama-filled buildings on the weekends" (23).

"Discipleship demands intentionality and relationship—by which each person is invested in specifically. This cannot happen in the worship service" (23).

- What do you think Jim means when he talks about relationship?
- How relational is your discipleship process?
- Do you find it easier or harder to talk to someone you know well about matters relating to personal conduct versus someone you barely know? Why?
- Does your church have any "spiritual brats?" If so, how do they impact your church's ministry effectiveness? If so, what does your church typically do when they act like a brat?
- Do you agree or disagree with Jim's statement about the limitations of the worship service? Why?

Chapter 2: The Invitation is the Definition

5. Get in a small group with three or four other people and answer the following questions:

- What is the purpose of your church?
- What is a disciple?

6. Reflect on the following statements and then answer the question below.

“We point our people to the definition of a *disciple* found in the familiar passage of Matthew 4:19. In this verse, Jesus gives an invitation to His future disciples, who are fishing at the time. He says to them, ‘Come, follow me...and I will make you fishers of men.’ We believe that this invitation describes the definition of a disciple and that to follow Jesus will mean a life change at the head, heart, and hands level of our beings.” (26-27)

“**Following Christ (head)**. [I will follow Him.] A disciple has surrendered to Jesus as Savior and Lord of his or her life. A disciple is one who says, ‘I know He is Lord and Savior and I accept Him as my authority.’”

“**Being changed by Jesus (heart)**. [He is making me more like Him every day.] Jesus said we would know a tree by its fruit (see Matthew 7:17-20). He did not mean perfect fruit; He meant growing fruit. As we spend time following Jesus, He changes us internally—He changes who we are.”

“**Committed to Jesus’ mission to save people from their sin (hands)**. [He has called me to be a fisher of men.] Jesus saved us for a purpose. Some believe we are given a ‘get out of jail free’ card and are free to do what we want with our lives—not true. God’s mission is now our mission, and we recognize that we are responsible for our own slice of history. Our hands are for His service.” (32-33)

- How does your group’s definition of a disciple compare and contrast from Jim’s?

Chapter 3: Intentional—Taking the Accidental out of Discipleship

7. “I believe that Jesus was the greatest disciple-maker in history. As I study His approach, I see three keys to His success:

1. Jesus was an *intentional* leader in every sense.
2. He did His disciple-making in a *relational environment*.
3. He followed a *process* that can be learned and repeated.

In other words,

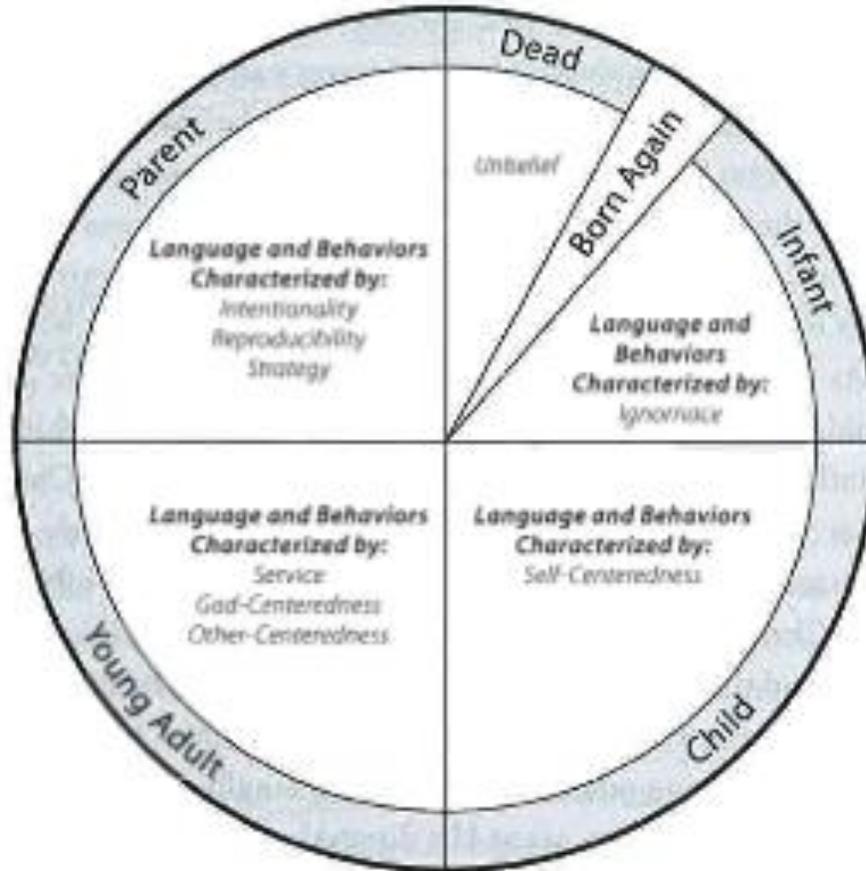
An intentional leader + relational environment + reproducible process = infinite number of disciples.” (35-36)

- This is how Real Life describes their discipleship process. How would you describe your church’s disciple making process?

8. Jim wrestled in college and coached before being called into ministry. He uses a lot of coaching and sports analogies throughout the book. As he describes what being intention looks like for a church, he says, “In order to do this effectively, we need to do what an intentional coach would do:

- ✓ Know the game
- ✓ Evaluate the players
- ✓ Create a relational environment for individual growth” (37)

- As you reflect on your church’s disciple making process, how well do your people “know the game”?
 - What are you doing to help you “evaluate your players”?
9. Their church uses the following model that describes five stages of a disciple’s growth:



“...at Real Life we teach people how they can know *where they are* in the discipleship process and *where others are* as well....we can know where a person is spiritually by paying attention to what that person does and says...one simple skill we teach our people is to listen for ‘a phrase in the stage.’ A person’s consistent words will often reveal what stage he or she is in spiritually.” (45)

- How accurately does their chart describe the “Christian maturation process”?
- What would you add or delete from their five-stage description?
- What do you understand him to mean when he says “we teach our people to listen for a ‘phrase in the stage’”?
- Do you agree with the principle that a person’s words and actions will indicate their level of spiritual maturity?

10. “I’ve found that many Christians have an inaccurate assessment of their own level of spiritual maturity as well as the level of those around them.” (43)

- Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

11. “Theology rarely causes church splits; breaks in relationships always play the biggest part in internal battles.” (44)

- Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

Chapter 4: Relational—Making a Way for Real Change

12. “I am convinced that little learning takes place in formal environment alone, which is why at Real life we focus on small groups that are relational.” (48) At Real Life we believe that in a good growth environment there is shepherding, transparency, accountability, and guided practice.” (52)

- ✓ Shepherding: “It requires work and commitment to chase the strays, bind up the hurting, and lead and feed those we are shepherding. True disciple-makers do all we can to guide those we disciple to safety and maturity.” (53)
- ✓ Transparency: “At Real Life we try to keep our small groups under twelve because people simply can’t know each other ‘for real’ in a larger group.” (56)
- ✓ Accountability: “...disciple-makers must earn the right to hold others accountable....some people don’t want accountability. They would much rather surround themselves with folks who tell them what they want to hear. The Word tells us, however, that the wounds of a friend can be trusted (see Proverbs 27:6).” (57)
- ✓ Guided Practice: “At Real Life we go through the process with everyone, from the leadership team on down. For instance, most of our small-group leaders started out in a small group, where they learned and watched the small-group leader. Later they became apprentices to the small-group leader and co-led the small group. As apprentices they met with the leader on a weekly basis for debriefing and any needed training. Finally they led a small group of their own. As small-group leaders, they usually met weekly with their coaches and monthly with their community pastor for debriefing and further training.” (59)
- Where does your church focus most of its energy when it comes to making disciples? One-on-one by pastor or another church leader, during the worship service, through Sunday School or small group life, with the believers family, other_____.
- As you reflect on how your small groups are working, which of the four areas mentioned above do you see working the best in your church?
- Which of the four needs the most work?
- What can you do to improve the relational nature of your church’s discipleship process?
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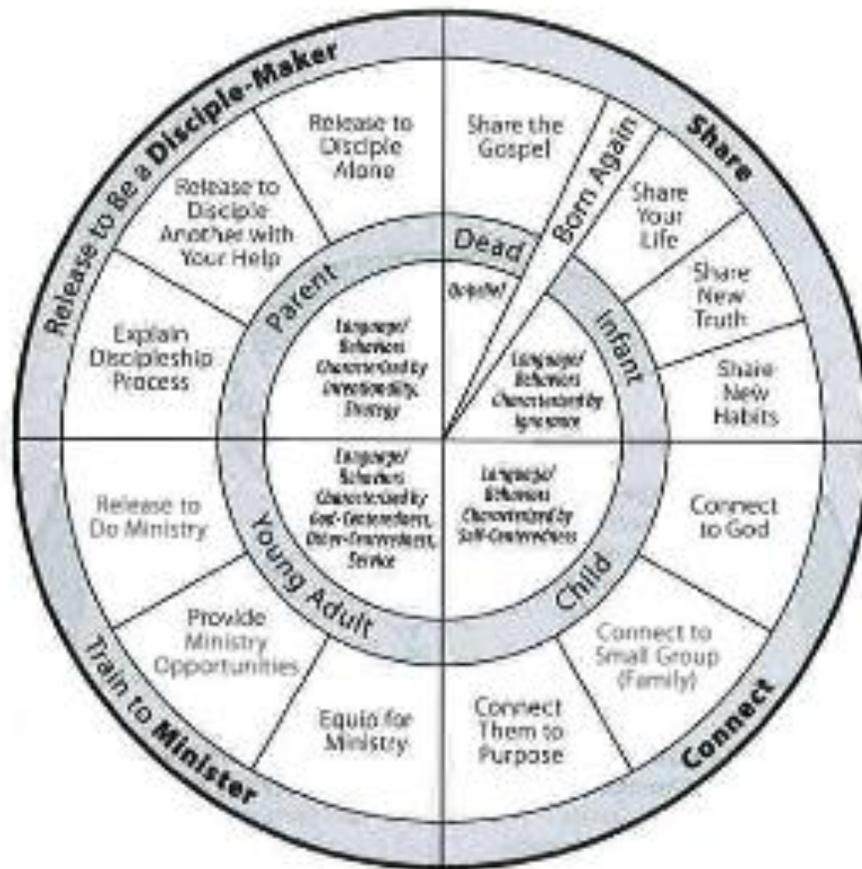
Chapter 5: Strategic—Following a Reproducible Process

13. “Sometimes believers will refuse to do a specific job, such as taking care of the physical needs of people, because they see it as being beneath them. They want a more ‘important’ job. It is my belief that if a person will not do a simple, thankless task, he or she doesn’t yet have the character for a more visible position.” (64)

- Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

- What do you typically do when you know you are dealing with a person who has “character issues”?

14. “Over the years, our church sought to study the Gospels to discover Jesus’ process for making disciples....As we studied, we saw a pattern that was passed on to the early church. Our church has given it a name. We call it the Share, Connect, Minister, Disciple process (SCMD).” (62). They use the SCMD process to further explain and expand the five stages of a disciple’s growth. Their expanded graphic looks like this:



- Study the graphic above. Does it approximate your understanding of the process for making a disciple?
- What do you see as its strengths and weaknesses?
- Could your church use this information to assist you in the disciple making process? If so, how?

Part 2: Mastering the Discipleship Process

Chapter 6: Only Our Part

15. “Before we go any further, I want to make sure that you understand your part in the spiritual growth process in the lives of the people you are discipling. First, we must remember that those we disciple are really disciples of Jesus—not of us...Second, as disciple-makers we play a part in the process and we are responsible to do things Jesus’ way; however,...God is the primary agent of salvation and change in a person’s life.” (71)

- How do you personally balance the responsibility of disciple making with the reality that it’s all about God and not you?
- How well do you think your church leaders understand this tension?

Chapter 7: Moving the Spiritually Dead Toward Life—Share

16. This section focuses on how to answer the question, “What to do with the spiritually dead: Share your testimony, Earn the right to share Christ, Pray that God shows you opportunities to share, and share the gospel.” (83-87)

- How do you personally connect and respond to those who are spiritually dead?
- What does your church do well in its efforts to connect with non-believers?
- What could your church do to improve in this area?

Chapter 8: Nurturing Spiritual Infants—Share

17. “Spiritual infants need: Individual attention from a spiritual parent, protection and care, to have the Word of God explained to them, and to have the habits of a believer explained and modeled.” (93) Keep in mind that in order for a family (small group) to care for a spiritual infant, there needs to be at least a spiritual young adult leading the group.” (101)

- In your ministry setting, how many spiritual infants has God placed in your path?
- What specifically are you and your church doing to care for them?

Chapter 9: Guiding Spiritual Children—Connect

18. “Adults might take offense at being called a spiritual child, which is why it is important to help believers understand the spiritual stages that all disciples go through and to clarify that spiritual children are not less valuable in God’s kingdom than spiritual parents are.” (105)

- If your church began to use the terminology that Real Life does, how do you think spiritually immature adults would respond?

19. “Spiritual children are spiritually immature for a variety of reasons. Some are newer believers, and even though they have progressed quickly and with intention, they still have far to go. Others have been saved for years but have never **connected** in a relational environment for discipleship, so they sputter along with just one cylinder hitting. Perhaps they were involved in a church but had little investment from an intentional leader (parent) because there wasn’t one to be had or because they didn’t want one. Again, some spiritual children have been Christians for years and have a lot of Bible knowledge and years of church involvement but inside remain immature. They have decided to follow Jesus at the head level, but their heart and hands are not engaged.” (107)

- As you look at the various reasons why spiritual children are immature, can you think of individuals you have ministered to who would fall into each category?
- Over time were you able to see some of them grow in their spiritual maturity? If so, what were some of the things that helped them the most?
- As you look back, are there some things that you would have done differently to help them grow? If so, what would you do differently?

20. “I believe that spiritual children should be able to serve in minor ways in the church. After all, in the physical world we give our kids chores; we try to teach them to have a servant’s heart and to be a responsible contribution to the family. However, there is a difference between allowing children the opportunity to serve and making them a leader. Before they lead, they must first learn to follow. They need to have a safe place to serve—safe for them and safe for the church body as well.” (110)

- Does your church limit certain leadership roles to those who are spiritually mature? If so, what are they?
- Where do you believe spiritual children can serve most effectively?
- Have you seen situations where spiritual children have been asked to serve and it created problems for the church?

21. “Some might assume that if a spiritual child is part of any small group at a church that he or she is in a **connect** environment and will grow spiritually. This is not necessarily so, as small groups can have different purposes. Some meet to do a task. For instance, our church has a small group where people meet together to knit blankets for the new mothers in the church. Although this group is a great ministry, the knitting circle is not a small group for the purpose of discipleship. However, it could become one if, while knitting, the women encouraged one another in their faith, studied the Word together, were honest with one another about where they struggled, prayed for one another and held each other accountable. If the group sought out anyone who was missing, then it would be on its way to being a connect-level discipleship group. If the leader intentionally strives to develop these women so that they could later disciple others, then the group has the kind of connect environment that a spiritual child needs to mature.” (112-113).

- As defined above, would you agree that discipleship making would happen best in “connect environment groups”? Why?

- As you look at your church’s ministry groups, which would fit Jim’s definition of a “connect environment”?
- Do you have more “connect groups” or more ministry/task focused groups in your church?

Chapter 10: Training Young Adults—Minister

22. “When we started Real Life, we had one small group. As the church grew, we had to try to keep up with what God was doing and needed more small-group leaders. However, the men who I felt were committed enough to lead were young in their faith and apprehensive about leading on their own. In order to give them the support and accountability they needed, I met with them once a week to go over the week’s lesson and to discuss issues that had come up the week before in their small groups. We talked about questions that had come up that they didn’t know how to answer. We discussed which absent group members they had called to check up on. We talked about how to train and nurture people who were in the spiritual infant or child stages of discipleship, and they told me who they thought was growing and could be apprentices to the small-group leaders.

After these small-group leaders had their group meetings on Wednesday nights, I called them to see how the meeting went. About once every six weeks, I visited each of their groups. This meant I needed an apprentice to lead my group while I was visiting their groups, so my apprentice also came on Wednesday mornings to our training time. It wasn’t long until these young men were ready to become spiritual parents themselves. So you see we *can* move people into leadership if they have the right hearts and the right kind of support.” (128-129)

- As you think about the above testimony, how much time and energy do you think Real Life (and specifically it’s pastor) invested in their small group leaders during their start up period? How many hours a week would that translate into?
- In the church’s first ten years, the number of small groups grew from one to seven hundred (page 184) and their membership grew from a few couples to over 8,000. Jim claims that their small group strategy is the primary reason for this growth. If your church could experience half that growth in the next ten years, would you be willing to adopt an intentional, relational, small group process to see it happen? If so, what do you think it would look like in your church? If not, what will you do to help increase the number of reproducing disciples in your church?

23. “Some spiritual young adults so like the idea of serving that they cannot maintain proper boundaries that will protect them and their homes. At the same time, other Christians so like the idea of being served that they use the inexperienced good-hearted leader inappropriately. If this is allowed to go unchecked, the results are strained marriages, wounded families, and hurting Christians. Spiritual young adults face burnout because of the things I have mentioned already but also because they don’t know when to say no to leaders in the church who need volunteers but don’t know how to protect them from overwork and use.” (130)

- Was there a time in your ministry where you would have been described as an overcommitted spiritual young adult? What did that feel like?
- Can you think of a spiritual young adult in your church that has become over committed? What are some of the things you could do to help them?
- Is there a spiritual young adult in your church today that you might need to protect from themselves or from other leaders who are expecting too much from them?

24. “One other caution: Sometimes when spiritual young adults are put into the leadership of a ministry, the ministry grows and people are drawn to them because of their natural abilities and servant’s hearts. However, keep in mind that spiritual young adults don’t naturally produce disciples who can disciple others. They serve people but do not train them, so the load on the young adult gets bigger and bigger. As their ministry grows and these young adults minister to those under their care, they can quickly be swimming in water way over their heads. They may feel proud because their ministry grew, or they may feel discouraged because they can’t keep up with it. Either response is a problem, which is why spiritual young adults need spiritual parents to help them process what is happening in their area of ministry and establish boundaries for the kinds of ministry they should or should not be involved with.” (130-131)

- How would you help a spiritual young adult who has become prideful?
- What would you do for a discouraged spiritual young adult?

25. “Because church is a team sport, it is important that the spiritual young adults understand the values and structure of their church. He or she should understand that the two of you (or your small group) are part of a larger team, working together to achieve the same goal. For example, at Real Life we have a community pastor who oversees several coaches, who in turn oversee and support all of the small-group leaders. Each small-group leader is training a future leader we call an apprentice. In addition every leader in our church must go through a class on joining the team and a class on discipleship training. Our leadership training class is for all emerging leaders and is by invitation only. When our leaders at any level see another potential leader, they are to recommend that the potential leader be invited to take the leadership training class. Being a leader is not a status thing; it is a privilege and responsibility to serve those we oversee. Just as Jesus gave up His life for His sheep, we care for the sheep that he has allowed us to serve. They are *His* sheep, not ours.” (131-132)

- New Life has a very structured leadership support system. How would you describe your church’s support system?
- How are potential new leaders identified in your church?
- Do you have individuals in leadership positions in your church that view their role from a perspective of power, prestige, or status? How can you help them accept the position as that of service and responsibility?

Chapter 11: Releasing Spiritual Parents—Disciple

26. “Spiritual parents are intentional, strategic, reproduction-minded, self-feeding, mission-minded, team-minded, and dependable. They are not just biblically knowledgeable.” (139)

- Who in your church would you describe as a spiritual parent?
- Do you have people in your church that have great biblical knowledge, but are not able to serve effectively due to spiritual immaturity?

27. Read the following excerpts and then answer the questions below:

“As a mature believer (not a perfect or completely mature believer), I try to have my own Bible study daily. I listen to other pastors and read their books because I know I need it; it is my responsibility to go to the spiritual fridge and pull out what I know my soul needs and then eat it. I listen to Christian radio—Christian music and about three sermons a day as I drive around our community. I am in a small group, and I lead devotions and prayer with my wife and kids. If I am missing something that I don’t know I am missing, I have mature believers around me to point that out. That’s why accountability is so important.” (140)

“Spiritual parents who are released into ministry need support, which means encouragement and accountability...What people are not held accountable to do, they will not do.” (146-147)

“No believer grows to the point that he or she doesn’t need further coaching. Humility enables us to grow. We always need to go further in the process of sanctification, and people will always be a part of that process. We never graduate past our need for connection.” (147)

- What are some of the things you do to continue to grow spiritually?
- Do you agree with his statement, “What people are not held accountable to do, they will not do?” Why or why not?
- Who do you turn to as a coach, mentor, encourager, accountability partner?

Chapter 12: A Few Warnings

28. This chapter gives the following warnings:

Warning #1: Don’t compare based on levels of maturity.

Warning #2: Don’t have premature expectations.

Warning #3: Don’t put a spiritually immature person into a position of leadership.

“Before we place people in an important leadership position, they must have a proven character over time no matter what they can do with their natural abilities.” (150)

“Not everyone is naturally outgoing, but with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can all be transformed into relational people—more loving, gentler, kinder, and so on.” (152)

Warning #4: Don’t forget that we can all have a bad day. “...there is a difference between a person who falls in a hole and immediately gets out and one who falls in a hole and

makes the hole a comfortable home. The only way we can tell the difference is if we know the person well.” (153)

Warning #5: Don’t forget that we all have a weak area.

- Which of these warnings will you have the most difficulty heeding? Why?
- Are there times in your life where you would have to admit that you fell in a hole and made it a comfortable home? Assuming your not there now, what did God use to get you out of the hole?

Chapter 13: A Curriculum for Small Groups

This is an excellent section on the benefits of storying. The television era has created more oral learners and their style of learning is very different.

Part 3: Letting Disciples Emerge as Leaders

Chapter 14: Finding Leaders for Your Church

29. "Most people who study the church in America lament the fact that the church has a crisis in leadership...I believe one problem is that we have redefined leadership in such a way we are looking for the wrong thing. We are looking for men who can entertain or teach rather than men who can lead. I believe that the way we do church does not allow leaders to emerge—some serve and most sit and watch." (165)

- Do you believe there is a “crisis in leadership” in the American church? Why or why not?
- To what extent do you agree with Jim’s evaluation of the problem?

30. Read the following quotes and then answer the questions below:

"One Sunday I lovingly and laughingly complained from the pulpit about a small-group leader who had baptized seventeen people without mentioning it to the church leadership for several weeks. I was excited that our people were sharing their faith, but I felt that the church as a whole needed to know about what was going on....After the worship service, Pete came up to me with tears in his eyes. 'Jim, I'm so sorry for what I have done. Last year we had eleven baptisms in my small group and I never told anyone in leadership about it'" (166).

"When gifted but spiritually unready believers are put in organizational leadership positions in the church, they bring this thinking with them. They think in terms of giving, attendance, salvation statistics, and buildings but not in terms of making disciples (168)."

"When people aren't mature disciples, they cannot value making mature disciples because they don't understand what one looks like." (168)

- Can small group leaders baptize new believers in your church? Why or why not?
- New Life’s leaders don’t seem to emphasize baptisms as much as they do other things. From what you have read and discussed, what do you think they are emphasizing?

- Knowing that we get what we count and we encourage what we celebrate, what are the things that your church is counting and celebrating? How do they relate to the task of making spiritually mature disciples who are making disciples?

31. "Courageous leaders are willing to lovingly confront people who derail the work of the church...while methodology does matter unless we deal with relational problems in a godly way, we cannot hope to reach the world." (171)

- How easy is it for you to personally and lovingly confront people who are derailing the work of the church?
- Are there relational problems in your church that need to be dealt with in a godly way?

32. "Effective leaders are aware of their own strengths and bring people onto the team to fill in the holes. No one can strategize, vision cast, team build, systematize and administrate, be a peacemaker, assess, pastor, train, educate, and so on all by himself. Good organizational leaders understand the value of each component, though they may not be the best people to implement or maintain that component."

- How well do you know your own strengths and limitations?
- How well do you know the strengths of your leadership team?
- How balanced are your strengths?
- Where do you have major voids that are holding your church back?

Chapter 15: Creating a leadership development factory

33. "Discipleship—when practiced the way I have outlined in this book—gives everyone a place to play. It gets people off the bench and onto the field. And when people are playing the game, it is easier to see who is emerging as a true leader. It lets the church get to know people and see what they can do. Because all of this is based on relationship, we know what their families are like, what kinds of marriages they have, and what their weaknesses are and we can build a team around them with people they already know and trust." (181)

- As you reflect on this short summary as well as all of the above information about the discipleship philosophy and practices of Real Life, did you pick up a new insight into the process of making disciples? If so, what did you learn?
- Is there a specific idea or action you heard about that you would like to incorporate into your church? If so, what is it?
- Are there leaders in your church who could benefit by being exposed to these ideas? If so, who are they, and how will you get the information into their hands.
- What specific next step, if any, will you take as a result of the insights you have gained? Who are you going to ask to hold you accountable to see that it is done?

*Mark R. Elliott served as a Director of Missions (Associational Mission Strategist) in western Iowa and eastern Nebraska for almost three decades. He is a strong advocate for obedience and Biblically based disciple making. As such, he knows that making healthy disciples requires Christian leaders to be constantly pursuing spiritual maturity—be lifelong learners. Because of the time constraints of ministry, most pastors focus their reading list on resources that assist them in teaching and preaching the Word of God. As such, books focusing on church health, leadership development, and church growth tend to find their way to the bottom of the stack. With that reality in mind, Mark has written discussion summaries on several books that have helped him to personally grow in Christ and that tend to find themselves on the bottom of most pastor's stack. Many pastors have found them helpful as they are able to more quickly process great insights from other pastors and authors.