

The Camarillo Story

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32 YEARS AS SENIOR PASTOR

CAMARILLO COMMUNITY CHURCH

BACKGROUND

I moved my family to Camarillo, California in 1983. To give you a little background about me, I was raised in a pastor's home and have been involved in ministry all my life. I was thirteen when I decided I wanted to spend my life serving Christ. When I graduated from high school, I left Miami, Florida where I was born and raised, and entered college at Florida State University (FSU) that had one of the best music schools in the country. I thought church music would be my ultimate vocation.

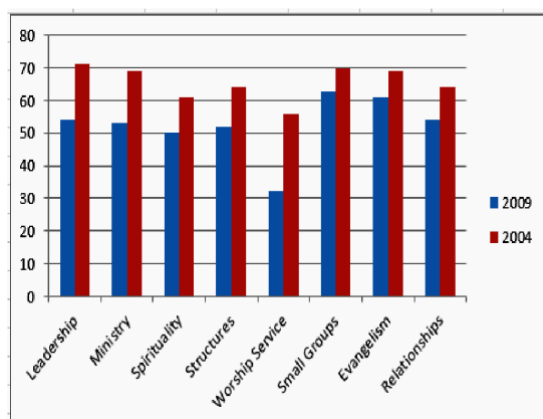
God's plan was a little different. Soon after graduating from college, I joined the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ. I considered the music ministry, but by this time, I was already married with one child. Being on the road, traveling with a small child didn't seem very wise, so we applied for the high school ministry. We were on staff with Campus Crusade for fourteen years. While on staff, I was mentored in small group discipleship. I also finished a Master's Degree in Biblical Studies and Church Growth, and decided God wanted me to pastor a church.

There was a small group of people in Camarillo, California, trying to build a church. They needed a pastor, and I needed a place to serve. That seemed like a good fit, so we began our journey together. The church grew and in three years, we had built our first building. The second Sunday in the new building we had to begin a second Sunday morning service. Sometime later, we added a third service...then a fourth. Our focus was an attraction ministry. We intentionally geared our programming to attract non-believers. When they came—and they did—we preached evangelistic messages to bring them to Christ. We were like a giant nursery, filled with baby Christians. Our property was large enough, and

we needed more room, so we decided to build another auditorium. This one seated a thousand people. It had the lights and screens, a huge production stage, and a massive sound system. It had a suite of offices, an area for small children, and adult education classes upstairs. We turned the first building over to the youth.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

But...we soon hit a wall. At about a thousand people, we stopped growing. Then we started losing ground. The back door seemed to be bigger than the front door. No matter what we did, we couldn't grow any further. We prayed, we went to all the Willow Creek conferences, the Saddleback conferences, read the books, but we found no answers. After moving into our newly built 1000-seat church building in 2002, the signs of decline began. Note the changes from 2004-2009 below.



“Facts are our friends.”

A lot of the mega-churches were doing internal assessments at this time. Surveys of their congregants were being used to determine the effectiveness of their ministries. So, we did one, too. Ours was called Retool. The *Retool Kit Pathway* was an assessment-planning vehicle for church leadership. It was a guided effort to renew leadership, community, and urgency that was designed to assist us in determining, communicating, and implementing new vision.

This was a two-year process begun in 2008 by asking 32 of our core men and women to answer critical questions about the effectiveness of all our church ministries. We wanted

honest answers, even if they hurt. And, they did hurt a bit. But we knew the answers came in love.

These were people committed to our church and really trying to help. We had a consultant come in to assist us to interpret the results. The same 32 volunteers came back in to hear how we scored. Up front, we had asked them for a two-year commitment...six weekends over two years. We asked for a Friday night and a half-day on Saturday, or three weekends each year.

Our intention was first, to consider the results of our strengths and weaknesses. The survey showed that people loved our buildings. They thought our ministries to children and youth were strong. They liked the music, and some liked my preaching. The area that the survey showed was weakest was in discipleship, their personal spiritual growth. Many of the attendees knew they weren't growing spiritually. We concluded that was the reason many were leaving and going to other churches, hoping to find a stimulus to further their spiritual development.

When Willow Creek, a mega church in Chicago, published the results of their *Reveal* study, they discovered similar results. In fact, when hundreds of churches around the country—small and large, urban and rural, north, south, east and west—did similar surveys, they all discovered virtually the same results. Churches in America were just not doing a very good job of helping people grow up spiritually.

RESULTS

In the spring of 2010, the conclusions from our two-year assessment resulted in seeing that we needed to solve this problem of personal spiritual growth. How would we help people grow to true maturity in Christ? The late Christian author, Charles Colson, described the church in America as “3000 miles wide and one-inch deep.” Cal Thomas, a Christian syndicated columnist, challenged the church to look at the quality of our discipleship. He wrote that the problem in our culture in the United States isn't about the abortionists. It isn't the pornographers or drug dealers or criminals. It is the “*undisciplined, undisciplined, disobedient, and Biblically ignorant Christians.*”

Our adult education pastor began Wednesday night classes targeting a variety of felt needs. He asked experienced teachers to address numerous practical topics and biblical studies.

People enjoyed these as well. We also worked hard to expand our small group ministry. One creative and highly motivated woman began a periodic women's meeting. She brought in inspirational speakers to address women's issues. They had fashion shows, talked about personal growth, mothering, and being a good wife. Another woman began offering annual women's retreats.

THE EXPERIMENT

While I was on a plane, coming home from one of those conferences that spring of 2010, I was reading an article in *Leadership Journal* by John Ortberg. He mentioned two men that had written some good material on discipleship. One was Richard Foster and the other was Greg

Ogden. I had heard of Greg Ogden, but I'd never read his material. So when I got off the plane, I googled him. I found his book called *Transforming Discipleship* and ordered it.

When I began to read, it sounded familiar, not unlike what I had been trained to do on Campus Crusade (now CRU) staff where we gathered students in Action Groups, leading them through basic growth material and then sending them out to start their own groups. I have to admit, we never saw many of them actually start and lead groups, but that was the intention.

I liked what I was reading so I ordered copies for three of our staff. I gave a copy to Jim, our small group pastor; another to Daryl, our evangelism pastor; and another to Bev, my personal administrative assistant. I asked them to read it quickly so we could talk about it the following week. When we sat down to talk, we decided to try an experiment. We called it an experiment because I was pretty sure it wouldn't work. We decided not to tell anyone else; we would just do it. We ordered copies of *Discipleship Essentials* to start groups in the summer of 2010.

We agreed it was worth a try. So we launched our four micro groups within the next four months. Mine was a triad. I intended to have one of my elders start a group on his own

since he had a lot of Navigator experience when he was in the military, so I thought he might just jump in and go with it. After 3 months, however, he still hadn't started a group, so I invited him into mine. The late addition provided a good learning experience for me. With the triad, only three of us, there were often long pauses in the conversation. When we added the fourth member, the discussion seemed to come alive. The fourth member seemed to filled the gap in our interaction.

I'm not sure it always works that way, but it did for us.

Each week, Jim, Bev, Daryl, and I met to discuss what we were learning to track and assess the progress of our newly formed micro groups. Much to our delight, all the groups were experiencing similar gratifying results. The people in our groups were actually doing their homework and loving it! They were memorizing their verses, even though we struggled a bit at times. Their loyalty to the groups and faithfulness to show up, encouraged us. Not only were *they* growing, but so were *we*, the leaders, growing in accountability. Yes, there is a cost. Meeting weekly required time, making a place in our schedules, but the investment for each of us was paying off. We were enjoying the study; we were enjoying the interactions in micro groups that seemed to be spiritually deeper, and we knew we were experiencing renewed growth. (See "Challenge to Discipleship" for details.)

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

These first four micro groups progressed at different rates. One group decided they were not concerned how fast or slow they went. They just wanted to make sure they were allowing time to thoroughly discuss all the details. Another group had new believers, while my group had two elders and an elder candidate. By the end of the first year, all of us had a significant conviction that we wanted to see these multiply in our church. We all knew other people who might be interested. The women's group quickly multiplied. The men in my group found other men to be in their new groups. The "slow" group took longer, but they eventually multiplied as well. Four groups became sixteen. The next year the sixteen groups multiplied again. Up to this point, we had not said much publicly about this new disciple-making effort. We were committed to letting them grow at their own pace. We knew God was doing something special, and we didn't want to mess up this organic growth.

Then, in the spring of 2011, I was reading another article in *Leadership Journal* by Gordon MacDonald titled "Going Deeper." I was convicted as senior pastor that I needed to be the

point person for discipleship and not delegate it to someone else. We were also challenged to make disciples as we read “Born to Reproduce” by Dawson Trotman.

One man called me and said he had a guy at work who wanted to be in his new group, but the man didn’t go to our church. The interested man attended the Good Shepherd Lutheran church in town. My new quad leader wanted to know if it would be all right to let him join. I couldn’t think of a reason why not, so I said, “Sure. Let him join.” A few weeks later, I got a call from Pastor Jim Johnson from the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church. He told me that he was aware that one of his men was attending one of our discipleship groups. Oops! I was waiting for the reprimand. But then, he asked if we could come and teach his church how to do discipleship quads.

That was the first church to hear about what we were doing, but many more did. The people in our micro groups were so excited about their spiritual growth that they were talking to their friends about it. Before long there were six other churches in town using the *Discipleship Essentials* to train disciplemakers. I began to invite pastors together to discuss what was happening in our churches. In the fall of 2012, I decided to invite Dr. Ogden—he lived only a few hundred miles north of us—to come and spend an evening with pastors to share his focus and experience on discipleship. I sent invitations all over Southern California. We had seventy to eighty pastors show up.

I invited more of my staff, who were also experiencing the same results, to share in our weekly update meetings. The spreadsheet for tracking groups that were spawning new micro groups literally grew “off the chart” to become second, third, and fourth generations with the exponential growth within the church and now outside the church. Some families were moving out of the area with their jobs (assignments from military bases in the area), and they shared information of transformation in other states in the US. One discipleship group met on board a battleship cruiser.

VISION MULTIPLICATION

Then in January of 2013 as one of my quads was meeting at the local Panera Bread Restaurant, a visitor walked in that morning. I didn’t know that Scott in my group had invited Debbie to come by. Some twenty years earlier she had gone to Romania to adopt a child. Seeing the heart-wrenching need for work with the orphans left from Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime, she had started a mission effort there called Heart of Hope. It involved summer Camp of the Good Shepherd, a half-way home for young women. and

work among churches there. Our church financially supported her mission, and she came to say thank you.

While she was there, Frank at our table jumped into the conversation and said, “Hey Debbie, you need to do *this* over there.” “Do what?” she responded. “This discipleship stuff.”

The conversation that followed involved a three-part strategy. The first step was to get *Discipleship Essentials* translated into Romanian. The second step was to invite pastors from Romania to the US to be trained by Dr. Ogden. And finally, if they experienced success with it, we would go to Romania where their churches would be venues to train additional pastors and church leaders. We suddenly had a vision to see the entire country of Romania saturated with churches training intentional disciplemakers.

The next day, Bev, my administrative assistant, contacted IVPress to see about getting the material translated. We were surprised to discover that *Discipleship Essentials* had already been translated into Romanian. A year earlier, God had led a publishing house (started by former Bible smugglers) to translate the book. The Lord had already accomplished the first part.

Phase 2 was to contact Romanian pastors to determine their interest. Debbie asked the Romanian publisher for the books and sent *Discipleship Essentials* to pastors that she knew and trusted there. Only when they indicated sincere interest, did she inform them of the opportunity to go to the US for training. Between May and August, 11 pastors responded. I stood before our congregation on a Sunday morning, told them about our plans and asked them to consider financially supporting the project. It was going to cost about \$45,000. In two weeks we had the commitments. We bought tickets for the pastors, helped them get visas, and enjoyed our first International Discipleship Summit. The pastors from Romania came in November 2013, along with two more from Friesland (the Netherlands). The thirteen trainees stayed in our homes, ate at our tables, and received 10 days of training. Our people fell in love with them and many continue to have contact.

They wanted us to visit Romania soon, so we travelled there in the spring of 2014 to present discipleship training in their churches. I asked for volunteers from our church, and thirteen of our people raised their own travel expenses and accompanied me to Romania to offer training. We were there for 10 days and held two training conferences, one in the

southern area, and one in the central part of the country. It's one thing for a pastor to stand up and talk about disciples making disciples, but it's far more impactful to hear lay people talk about being in a quad and then leading their own discipleship micro groups.

DISCIPLING OTHER DISCIPLES FROM AROUND THE GLOBE

On the way home from Romania, someone excitedly asked, "Pastor, what are we going to do next?" After a little group discussion, we decided we would schedule a Global Discipleship Summit (GDS) in Camarillo. We asked all the members of our church to give us names of pastors from their home countries who might be interested in coming to the US to learn about discipling. Our church being in Southern California was very multi-ethnic. We had a Great Commission Sunday and had members of our congregation reading scripture in 21 different languages from our stage.

By this time, we were in our 5th year of disciple-making multiplication. The majority in our church were in disciple-making quads. We sent out 85 invitations to countries around the world, and 52 pastors were able to get visas and come to the GDS. This time the financial need was estimated at \$85,000. Again, in two weeks the money was pledged, and when the \$85,000 came in, they kept giving. We received \$112,000 and needed every penny.

As I reflect on the generosity of our church toward these events, I can only explain it by remembering that most of our congregation were in discipleship quads and thoroughly convinced of the effectiveness of what we were offering. They came to our Global Discipleship Summit for the ten days of training. Dr. Ogden again came to help us teach. Those from our disciple-making quads are our most generous givers, our most zealous evangelists, our most frequent volunteers, and the source of most of our future leadership.

BIRTH OF THE GLOBAL DISCIPLESHIP INITIATIVE

Two months after the Global Discipleship Summit in August of 2015, I retired from the role of Senior Pastor at Camarillo Community Church to join with Dr. Ogden to form the Global Discipleship Initiative (GDI). Our goal is to launch discipleship initiatives in every country in the world by the year 2026. We continue to train pastors and churches in the United States and travel extensively training pastors and church leaders in other countries.

Many in our local church began to accept the ownership of not merely coming to church, but to hand off their faith to others. That's the difference that we saw where information led to transformation. This time, we took the commitment seriously based on the covenant each of us individually signed as we began more micro groups using *Discipleship Essentials*.

As you see, our journey has taken time. Time to experiment. Time to encourage others along the way. Time to gather data. For example,

1. "I have learned I can do it! I'm into the Word so much more, and I know what I am here for."
2. "I have learned that through the process of *Discipleship Essentials* that lives change."
3. "I'm excited to disciple others. I have become focused on God's work."
4. "God has taught me obedience to the leading of His Holy Spirit. I'm finding I can do it! I've always wanted to go deeper with the Lord. It's finally happening."
5. "I am becoming more accountable and focused."

WHAT'S NEXT?

The multiplication continues because we pray about who to ask into the next group. Who are those 2-3 people who come to mind during and after finishing the 25 lessons? The built-in repetition of *practice* by repeating the process again and again reinforces our own vital disciplines, our accountability as disciples, and commitment to being authentic Christ-followers.

Sounds easy doesn't it? If this were all of the story you heard, you might think, "All I need to do is create groups of 4 we call quads or micro groups, and let them grow and multiply and *voila*, you have a disciple-making church!" But at this juncture you are probably asking for a deeper picture on two fronts. (1) How was the church transformed into a discipling culture? What were the transformative characteristics that emerged? (2) What were the struggles along the way? What problems emerged that you had to address?

