



## MAKING DISCIPLES AMIDST TRANSFORMATION

**T**he oft-quoted UMC mission statement tells of making disciples for the transformation of the world.

An intriguing variation of this might read, “making many more disciples as a result of God’s transforming presence.” Documented cases of this exist in many places in the world today and have plenty of historical precedent. In essence, the thesis amounts to a core group of highly committed Christians devoting themselves to intense spiritual practices, prayer being primary, on behalf of a community. This is followed by God showing up and transforming everything in a relatively short time frame, during which and shortly after, droves come to faith in Christ and become disciples.

One example is Almolonga, Guatemala. Prior to the transformation in the 1990s, this highlands village had a very high alcohol consumption rate among the men. There were 36 cantinas where alcohol could be consumed. There were four jails, usually overflowing, with the additional offenders shipped to surrounding communities. The economy was feeble, with only four truckloads of produce exported monthly. The Christian presence was marginal, with those who were deeply committed often experiencing persecution. Old-fashioned idolatry was practiced by many of the townsfolk.

Finally, some of the local pastors and laypeople had had enough and began to cry out to God with prayer and fasting. They expressed an acknowledgment of the desperation of the situation and the resulting need for God’s intervention, as well as a deep hunger for the person and presence of God. After some time their prayers began to be answered. Some dramatic healings and conversions took place and then things snowballed.

In a few short years, a total transformation of the community took place. Instead of a few struggling

churches, there are now over 30 churches, several with over a thousand members. Of the 36 cantinas, only three remain open. Many of the former cantinas are now churches. Around 90 percent of the 20,000 population worship Jesus. All the jails have closed. Formerly unproductive, alcoholic men have become responsible family men with strong work ethics. They have saved up money to buy Mercedes trucks to transport their produce. The four truckloads of produce a month have become 40. The vegetables are not just more numerous, but also enormous. The growing cycle for some went from 60 days to 25. Underground springs opened up. The local Christians hold that God healed the land.

None of this can be attributed to any brilliant church programs or planning. No natural explanations begin to account for this transformation of persons, churches, government, society, land, and economy. The credit can only go to God. Interestingly, much of the disciple making was playing catch-up to the unprogrammed conversions that happened once God showed up. This may seem like an isolated extreme outlier in community transformation, but the Sentinel Group ([www.glowtorch.org](http://www.glowtorch.org)) has documented 800 of these around the world in the last 15 years, as well as studied past moves of God. Yes, few of these have happened in North America, but there has been one documented example in the United States.

Clay County, Kentucky is an Appalachian locale, which had a bad rap for years as being a den of drug trafficking and corruption. This compounded into all kinds of social problems. Youth were selling and using drugs, and they reaped the consequences. One or two addicts a week were dying. City officials were taking

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bribes to look the other way. Churches had programs to help those they could, but were barely making a dent in the problems. At the same time, the churches were largely inward looking and concerned about being islands in the sea of despair.

Finally, some of the pastors got desperate enough to really start praying. Pastors from churches that normally would not associate with one another joined in. One Saturday morning, after an all-night prayer meeting, the UMC pastor said, "I believe we need to pray for God to expose the darkness." A few months later, arrests began as the FBI started moving in. When city officials were arrested, some churches lost members because they were either arrested or were cronies of those who were. One of the pastors envisioned a march to make a statement against the sin of the community. The Saturday prayer meetings were now at 150 in attendance, but the pastors had no idea how many would march. Many of the organizers were receiving violent threats. To make matters worse, the weather was awful on the day of the march. Yet 3,500 folks from 63 churches in the county showed up. This was a turning point.

Since then the corrupt officials are gone. Addicts are coming to faith in Christ and joining the churches. Drove of students are turning from drugs to Christ. The county seat, Manchester, now has an official sign below its name, "City of Hope." Since the march in 2004, \$9 million dollars in drugs have come off the streets, 3,300 drug dealers have been arrested with a 97 percent conviction rate, 1,500 vouchers for addicts' rehabilitation/recovery have been issued, and 50,000 children have been reached with help and education. Wildlife has returned to the area.

The Sentinel Group has done exhaustive research on communities, and even countries, that are experiencing these kinds of transforming revivals. Some are documented in DVD format, available at their website. "Appalachian Dawn" documents Clay County. The Sentinel Group has also identified key principles that can be utilized to invite God to move in transforming revival in any community. They are quite adamant that this cannot be programmed.

In fact, at its best programming brings about no more than incremental changes over a long time frame and can usually be entirely attributed to human efforts. Transforming revival is explosive and rapid and can only be attributed to God.

Among the common characteristics of communities having had this experience is a core group of Christians who recognize the desperation their community is in and identify the underlying sin causing it. They then cooperate in focused prayer that is frequent, long, and intense, often accompanied by fasting. Usually this will involve Christians of various stripes laying aside their differences and uniting under the commonly understood needs in the community and commonly recognized reality that God is the only answer. In addition to longing for God's help, there is a hunger for the person and presence of God. Furthermore, there is faith and expectation that God will move and that they will continue in their crying out to God, until it happens and beyond. There is often persecution so perseverance is essential. Also critical to the breakthrough is deep repentance and humility amongst those seeking God's intervention.

While all of this seems far removed from the experience of modern-day American United Methodists, it is not far removed from our heritage. As we ponder how to live out our mission statement, we might do well to strive for transforming revival.

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