



## MINISTRY'S SWEET SPOT

*The methods that Jesus used to prepare his disciples are an inspiring model for training and equipping leaders and lay people for service. . . . Church is not a place where people go but something that people are, and understanding and utilizing one's gifts and talents enrich both the body and the believer.*

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Recalling my early years in Christian ministry, I am embarrassed to realize how much I invested in something that could have been called “Gordon MacDonald, Inc.” It was too much about me and not enough about Jesus and others.

Somewhere along the line, my self-building activities gave way to building an organization, a church organization. That meant recruiting teams, encouraging leaders, conceiving strategies that would cause a congregation to grow (both spiritually and numerically). Pastoring became a very satisfying experience, and I loved my work . . . most of the time.

But one weekend, after years of organization building, I awakened to something much better—a sweet spot of ministry, you could say, where it all just seemed right. Rather than building me or even building an organization, I discovered people-building, a ministry with younger Christians who—properly prepared—might go

on to be difference-makers in some part of the kingdom.

That awakening happened when I visited the United States Military Academy at West Point as a speaker in the cadet chapel. I was astonished at the dignity and excellence of the men and women I met. It was unforgettable.

The mission of the USMA is:

*To educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character committed to the values of Duty, Honor, Country, and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation as an officer in the United States Army.*

This got me wondering: *What is the equivalent in the church where I pastor? Where and how do we educate, train, and inspire leaders capable of influencing others for the sake of Jesus Christ?* The truth was that we weren't doing that.

Oh, sure, we had leadership training among our programs. Our bulletin might read: "Anyone wanting training in this or that activity should come out on Wednesday night." In ninety minutes, we implied, we'll make you a leader. Kind of like the TV deals: three payments of \$39.95, and we'll make you a real estate tycoon.

We wanted "players" who were unafraid to mix it up, experiment with ideas, and move the conversation along. That's not how it's done at West Point or Annapolis or the Air Force Academy. In those schools, it's not so simple.

## **New Leaders Don't Just Happen**

When I returned home, I tried to sell my vision of a "West

Point” leadership development effort to our staff, our lay leadership, to anyone willing to listen. Apparently I did a poor job. I got smiles, agreement in principle, and comments like, “We need to think about that . . . sometime.” Admittedly, at first, I was all words and few specifics.

Then one day, I got it. A vision with no precedent in a church usually requires that someone (me, in this case) do the job himself.

A breakthrough occurred when my wife, Gail, realizing I was serious, said, “This is something you and I could do together. And I think we would be smart if we took the idea out of the church building and into our home.” It was the first of her many bright ideas regarding this endeavor.

We searched for materials that fit our vision, and we found nothing satisfying. We realized that leadership development is not a program. It is about strong relationships in which people grow to be what God designed them to be. It’s sort of like what Jesus made happen when he selected twelve learners to be with him. Twelve guys in whom he—and he only—saw leadership (or influence) potential.

Gail and I decided to select twelve to fourteen people and see what might be possible. One of my staff associates had been meeting with a small group of young adults. When he resigned to move to another ministry, I sat down with his group, told them about my dream, and asked if they would meet with Gail and me at our home a week later. They all agreed.

When the evening came, Gail and I shared the dream in detail. We proposed meeting weekly on Wednesday nights for about nine months.

“We’ll try to tell you everything we’ve learned about following Jesus, hearing his call, discovering our individual giftedness, and

what it means to grow in biblically defined character,” we said. “We’ll tell you whatever we’ve learned about influencing people.

“But here’s the fine print,” we said. “You will have to strip your calendar for about forty Wednesday nights so that you are here—on time, staying the full duration, fully prepared—every night. You can’t miss unless you’re dying or your company sends you out of town and tells you that you’ll lose your job if you don’t go.”

We ended that first evening by telling the group, “Pray and think about this, and if you believe that God is leading you into this experience, call us.” Within a few days, everyone called with his or her yes, and the schedule was set.

That was over ten years ago. And almost every year since, we have selected and launched a similar group. Today, Gail and I can identify about one hundred people who have gone through iterations of “West Point” and—almost without exception—are engaged in some significant effort in serving God. Several have gained degrees and are in formal ministry positions. The majority are exercising various forms of lay influence either inside their churches or in the larger world, doing good in the name of Jesus.

## **What We Do**

Whenever I talk about this, people zoom in. They want to know more. They realize the importance of this for a church’s long-term future. How do you train tomorrow’s Christian leaders?

We called our efforts LDI: Leadership/Discipleship Initiative. I don’t remember exactly why, except West Point wasn’t quite to everyone’s liking.

“Do you have a curriculum?” I am often asked.

The answer is that there is no \$39.95 curriculum. I wonder if

Jesus had a curriculum to follow up his words, “Follow me . . .” In the nineteenth century, an Englishman, A. B. Bruce, wrote a book, *The Training of the Twelve*, in which he tried to trace the curriculum Jesus followed. I highly recommend his book, but I warn you: It’s no easy read.

LDI is an intuitive approach to leadership development. Gail and I knew the outcomes we wanted, and we knew some of the disciplines we wanted to teach. What we didn’t know was how it would flow from week to week.

Now, over ten years later, we are able to describe what we have done and what we have learned. Our goals for each group were:

- To identify people with potential to influence others if they were appropriately coached.
- To accelerate their spiritual growth so that they would become strong, self-nourishing followers of Jesus who would seek to grow in godliness for the rest of their lives.
- To give them an experience of all that the Christian community is capable of becoming when people truly love one another as Jesus loves us.
- To demonstrate what it means to feel called and gifted, and to discover that there is no greater joy than to be caught up in God’s purposes for a particular generation.

We suspected that if we simply put an ad in the church bulletin, saying, in effect, “Come to Gail and Gordon’s house on Wednesday nights, and we’ll teach you how to be leaders,” we would be inundated, and a large percentage would come for the wrong

reasons.

It has often been noted that Jesus tended to be unreceptive to volunteers. Believing that to be a significant principle, we decided to make LDI something different from anything else in the church. We would vet people, quietly and discreetly.

As that first LDI year came to an end, Gail and I began to search for our next “dozen.” We commenced our search early in February because the September start date was only eight months away.

As we drove home from various church activities, our conversations often focused on the people we were observing. Since Gail is particularly good at studying people and making intuitive judgments, I relied heavily upon her insights.

“I was watching Bob this morning,” she’d say. Or, “Have you ever thought about Craig and Lori . . .” And we’d talk about what we were both seeing.

Did they show evidences of faithfulness, of spiritual desire, of seeking ways to serve? We were not going to invite people into LDI who had not shown they were loyal to their commitments and covenants. Many church folk are good with their words and promises, but quickly fold when the excitement of something new morphs into something that is more or less routine. Faithfulness to us began with a reputation for showing up (on time, prepared, and generally enthusiastic).

We were not interested in people who got attention by having chronic problems. LDI was not meant to be a support or therapy group. There is a place for such gatherings in the congregation, but LDI wasn’t one of them.

Yes, LDI people have struggles during the year. Who doesn’t? Someone loses a job, a spouse becomes seriously ill, a son or

daughter presents a worrisome problem. Under those circumstances, the LDI groups experienced the joy of coming alongside each other: praying, caring, and serving one another. We all learned how to “pastor” and how to pray for each other.

## **What We Looked For**

In short, we were looking for:

- *People who were teachable.* Individuals who asked good questions, who took seriously the Christ-following life, who went out of their way to grow spiritually.
- *People with essential social skills.* People who showed respect and regard for others, not so argumentative or abrasive or touchy that they didn’t fit well with others.
- *People who would not simply sit for an entire evening saying nothing.* We wanted “players” who were unafraid to mix it up, experiment with ideas, move the conversation along, and venture opinions.

By May or June, we usually had a list of twenty people that we had observed, prayed over, even quietly tested a bit (without their realizing it). In August or early September, we would invite them all to our home for dinner.

After dessert, we would gather the group and tell them the story of how the LDI idea evolved. We would share our objectives and some of the things we believed God had done in previous groups. We would recount stories of various participants who were now in some form of leadership (with their permission, of course) and assure our

guests that they could go to any of these former LDIers and ask them about their experience.

It was important during the evening to tell everyone what we had seen in them and why we felt led to invite them. This turned out to be significant. For many, this was the first time they had ever had anyone identify characteristics in them that marked them as potential influencers.

Before the evening ended, we came to the “ask.”

*We’re inviting each of you to consider LDI for the next year. But we don’t want you to accept our invitation until you’ve spent several days thinking through the implications. It’s going to mean every Wednesday night (later this became Monday night) for about forty weeks. It will require getting here early, staying late, being prepared, diving into the evening’s events with nothing held back, and giving yourselves to some challenging work.*

*Are you ready for this? Don’t say yes until you’ve prayed your way to a decision and you’re sure, because once you say yes, you’ve begun a covenant relationship—not just with Gail and Gordon but also with a dozen other people. Our affection for you will not change whether you say yes or no.*

And each year, out of twenty invitees, twelve to fourteen have usually said yes. Some were single, others married. Occasionally, one spouse said yes but not the other. The participants ranged in age from twenty-three to fifty; a recent couple was in their seventies (with the spirit of forty-somethings). Age, gender, and marital status were less important than keeping the covenant.



## **A Year in the Life . . .**

Each year's group began sometime in September. During the first weeks, we taught the group how to read analytically—the Bible, significant chapters from books, articles, etc. We discovered early on that many Christ-followers are fearful of reading challenging material that provokes the mind and heart. We also found that too many jump to conclusions and opinions before they really have pushed themselves to learn what the author is trying to say. It's only after you have taken the time to understand what the author is truly saying, we taught, that you can afford to offer your evaluation of what has been said.

We found value in having a group read assigned material aloud: person by person, each reading a paragraph or two. There is something about hearing something read out loud that brings new understanding and insight.

From there, Gail taught each group the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which helps people understand how different we are from each other. We studied the spiritual disciplines, and from there we did a study of the biblical meaning of character. Next, we tried to master the Bible's teaching on spiritual giftedness. All during these studies, we tried to teach the practical skills of influence and leadership. Not a little of that was done by modeling—the way meetings were led, for example.

Much of this was not done through a lecture method—so easily the first instinct of preachers like myself. We became convinced that learning and growing came through group discovery and dialogue. “Look for words, for phrases, for patterns, and then for the key ideas that an author offers. Then work as a group to build your own ideas



of where this truth or that might take you.” In so doing, the LDI group learned how to grow and learn on its own—a skill that can take one through an entire lifetime of spiritual development.

Each year, we noticed a defining moment when the group stopped looking at Gail or me for approval every time they ventured a comment. They came to see themselves as a team of learners. It was beautiful: learners eagerly seeking wisdom, whether or not Gail and I were there.

Many of our readings came from Scripture. Each group studied about twenty biblical leaders and used the text to discover what various leaders look like. Later in the year, they moved on to great leaders of the Christian movement (St. Patrick, St. Francis, John Wesley, Sarah Edwards, and Catherine Booth, for instance). Each person in the LDI group read the biography of one of these individuals and offered a presentation on how that man or woman influenced the generations that followed them.

At the midpoint each year, every LDI person learned to write his or her story. For each participant, this was a gigantic challenge: to chronicle the flow of one’s life-journey (with its triumphs and its testings), becoming aware of the patterns of God’s involvement in one’s life.

For some, this exercise was a piece of cake; for others it was something like a lifetime achievement. At some point, group members got the opportunity to read their story. Gail and I were the first readers, to set the pattern. And as we did, we left very little out in order to demonstrate what vulnerability and transparency looks like, where God shook things up and ordered our paths.

After listening to stories for many years, I can tell you this: Almost without exception, every person’s story is marked with pockets of deep sadness and tragedy—lots of stuff that never surfaces

in the course of normal church life.

The result of all this storytelling? A growing bondedness that beats anything I've ever seen in larger church life. A love, a caring, and a level of friendship that could never have happened without the telling of these stories.

After every story, there were questions and conversation. Finally, the storyteller of the evening was invited to the center of the room where, surrounded by the others (who lay hands upon that person), there followed about thirty minutes of the most moving praying I've ever heard. Many learned how to pray with power during those prayer times.

## **What Would We Not Change?**

LDI worked best when it was team-taught. I can tell you bluntly, almost nothing would have worked in our LDI if Gail had not partnered with me. Almost every year when we reached the final week and did a group evaluation, someone said—with the agreement of the others—"Well, Gordon, we know you want us to say that the highlight of the year was the things we read. But we learned most by watching you and Gail work together—how you complement each other, how you work out your differences in temperament and style, how Gail creates such a hospitable environment, and how you support each other and make things happen." The teaching partner doesn't have to be a spouse, but team leadership is key.

Second, it was vital to make it clear that LDI was a priority. We would rather that a person said no to our invitation than to say, "I can be there 75 percent of the time." A group always (always!) suffers when one of its members is inconsistent.

Third, we tried LDI in the church building, and we tried it in

the home. A home—preferably the leader’s home—is, without a doubt, the best environment for this.

Finally, we knew from the beginning that each LDI group has to reach a terminus point. Just as Jesus told his disciples, “No longer will I call you my servants, but you are now my friends” (cf. John 15:15), so people had to understand that LDI had term limits. Believe me, no one—in any year!—wanted that moment to come, especially Gail and me. LDI people became sons and daughters to us. Every part of us wanted to hold on to them. If we had given to them, they had given equally back to us in ways they will never know.

I have to admit, we cheated on this principle at times. LDI groups have had occasional reunions. They love each other too much. When they have these reunions, they usually invite us, and as often as possible, we go. And when we’ve gone, we’ve driven home late in the evening with a rich glow in our hearts.

Paul wrote to the Galatians of his greatest pastoral passion: that “Christ be formed in you” (Gal. 4:19 KJV). Until LDI, I never fully appreciated his words. Now I understand that this is what our endeavor was all about.

My greatest regret LDI-wise? That we didn’t have the wisdom to start it during my earliest years as a pastor. I should have insisted that something like LDI be included in my job description: that 20 percent of my pastoral time each year be invested in fifteen to twenty people. Let someone else do the committee work. Give me a dozen or so people each year (well, give them to Gail and me), and we’ll pour whatever we’ve got into them.

Think of it: what could have happened if there had been forty years of LDI, with twelve to fourteen participants a year. That’s more than five hundred “commissioned officers.”

I wish I had visited West Point earlier in my life.