

2023 | INTRODUCTION

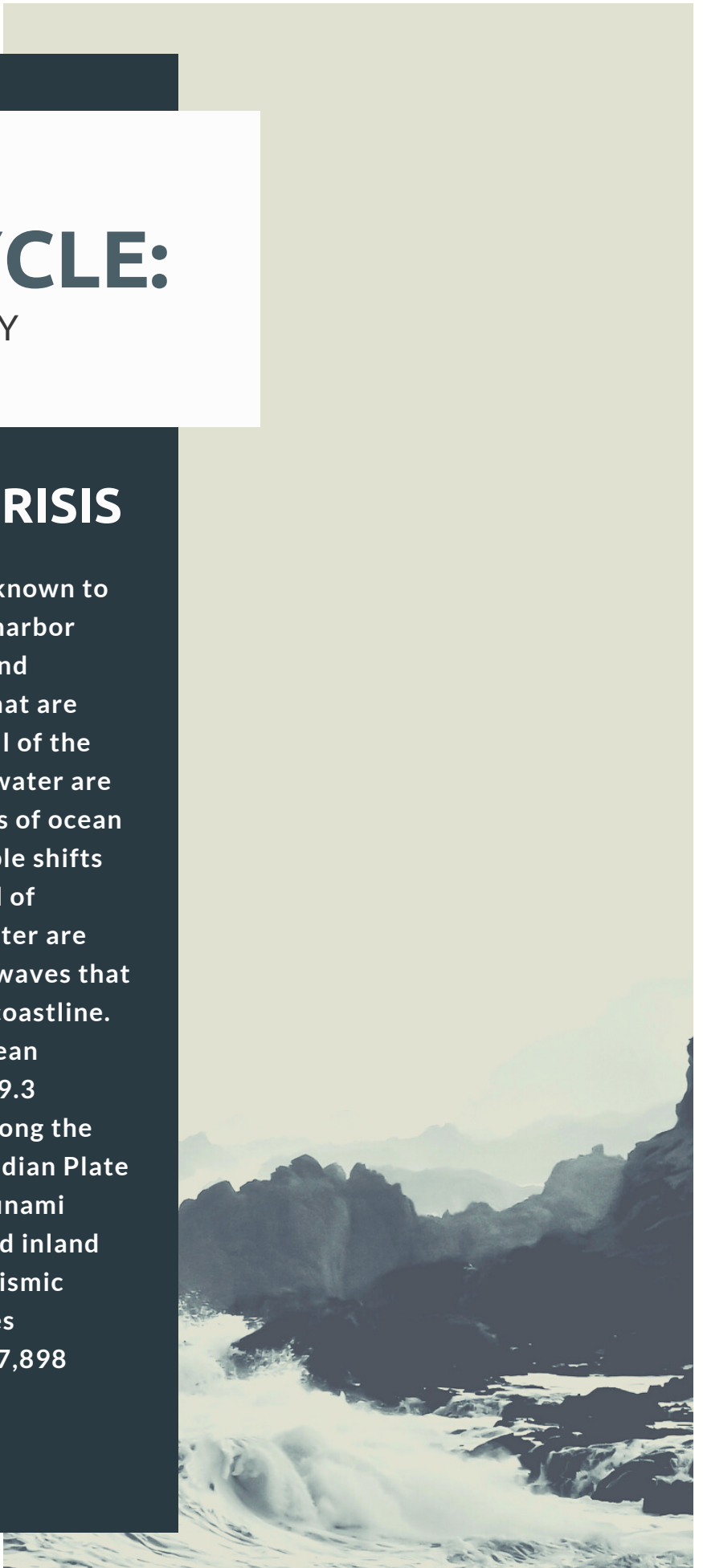
# DISCIPLE-CYCLE:

## SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

### SUBMERGED INTO A CRISIS

One of the greatest natural disasters known to man is a tsunami. In Japanese, it means “harbor waves” indicating it’s all-encompassing and engulfing nature. Unlike regular waves that are created by wind and the gravitational pull of the moon and sun, these monstrous walls of water are typically triggered by huge displacements of ocean floors caused by earthquakes. The invisible shifts in a large mass of seafloor releases a kind of domino effect where large volumes of water are displaced suddenly, releasing a series of waves that go undetected until they almost reach a coastline.

On December 26, 2004, the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami occurred. A 9.1-9.3 earthquake happened due to a rupture along the fault between the Burma Plate and the Indian Plate in the ocean floor. A series of massive tsunami waves grew up to 100 ft. high then headed inland after being created by the underwater seismic activity offshore. It impacted 14 countries resulting in an estimated death toll of 227,898 people from Indonesia to Alaska.



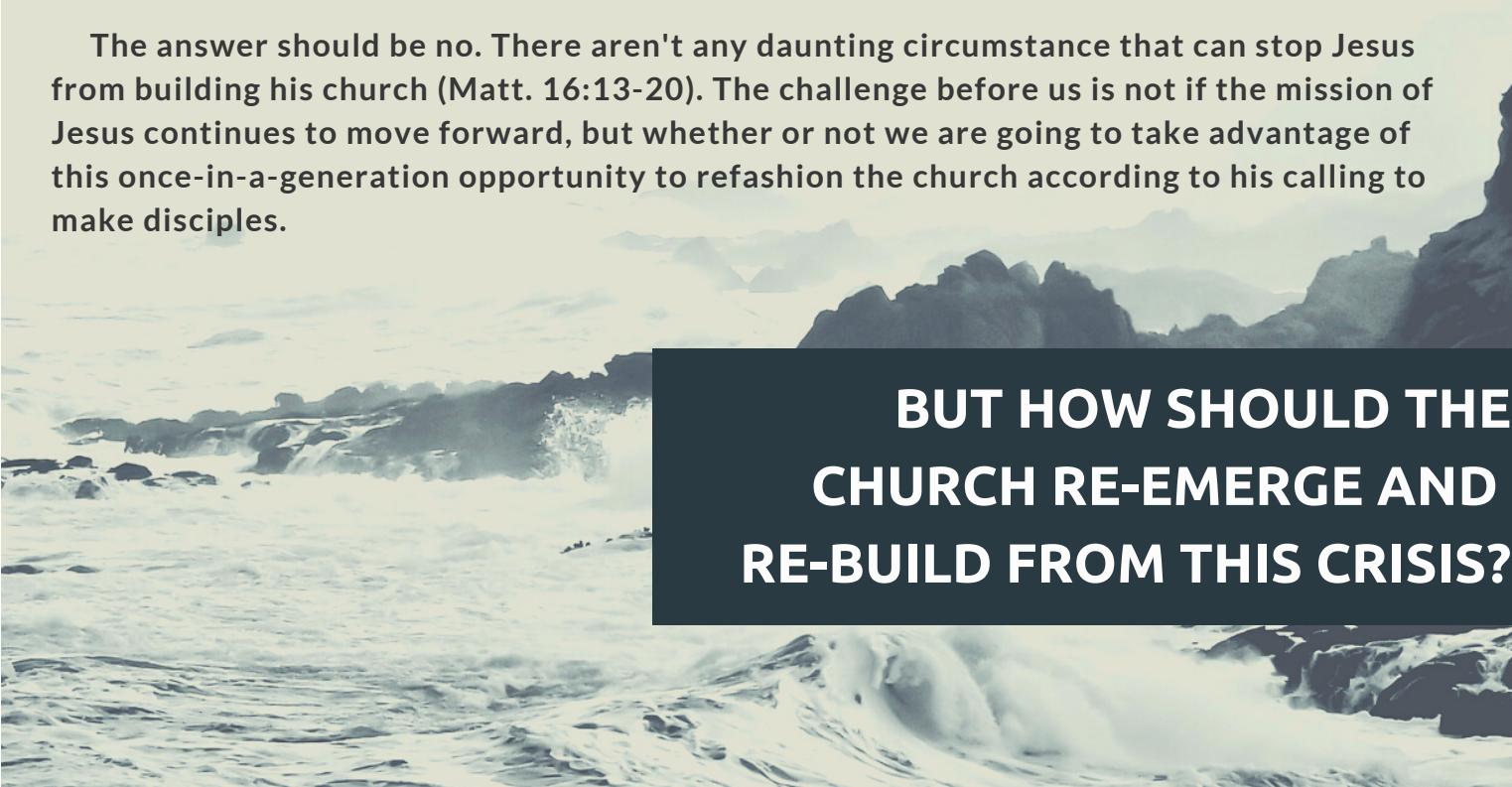
In similar fashion in late 2019 the region of Wuhan, China began to report an outbreak of a coronavirus that was highly infectious. Almost four years later, more than seven million people have died worldwide, with over one million people passing away in the U.S. Not only have millions been infected and died, it has created a world-wide economic impact with over 40 million in the U.S. alone losing their jobs. The results of this global event are still being felt and it will be years before we can fully measure how much it has affected our entire world.

The church was not left unscathed by the Pandemic. We are just now beginning to see how a series of shutdowns have created apathy and fatigue in many church members, resulting in all types of reduction of ministry. Reports are coming in from many churches of attendance being reduced by over 30% on average, compared to pre-pandemic numbers as they have sought to reassemble.

Coupled with that is a major downturn for most churches in offerings leading many trendwatchers to estimate that up to 25% of protestant churches will close over the next few years. Linked to that prediction is the projection that many ministers will be choosing early retirement or simply resigning their positions due to COVID-fatigue and other factors.

Just like the devastating destruction that a tsunami leaves in its wake, the American church seems to have been stripped down to its foundations. The combination of a Pandemic, wide-spread failures/controversy among Evangelical leaders, and a cultural dive into moral relativism has made the church seem less relevant. But is this completely tragic?

The answer should be no. There aren't any daunting circumstance that can stop Jesus from building his church (Matt. 16:13-20). The challenge before us is not if the mission of Jesus continues to move forward, but whether or not we are going to take advantage of this once-in-a-generation opportunity to refashion the church according to his calling to make disciples.



**BUT HOW SHOULD THE  
CHURCH RE-EMERGE AND  
RE-BUILD FROM THIS CRISIS?**

# GETTING BACK TO THE BASICS

When a crisis occurs we have an opportunity to redefine what is most important. In this process we should have the courage to remove what is ancillary and double-down on what is essential. Someone recently quipped that, “If church leaders ever had a chance to kill sacred cows and get rid of fruitless organizational bureaucracy in congregations, it is now!”


Getting rid of anything that stands in the way of the church fulfilling its mission is possible because every church seems at one level or another to be operating on a re-launch model as we emerge from the Pandemic. This means that where there has once been resistance and occasionally even rebellion against making changes that were desperately needed, church leaders now have a golden chance to rebuild the church into a lean, clean, missional machine.

The key to do this in a way that is sustainable is to pray and think through how the church goes about making disciples. But what is a disciple? The word was used two hundred sixty-nine times in the NT as compared to “Christian” which was used only three. This should alert us to something. What did it mean in Jesus’ day? In the ancient world the word meant apprentice. If you followed a teacher at the time that the New Testament was written you lived with him, ate with him, and sought to mimic what he said and how he lived. You practically immersed your life with his.

While simple in comprehension it is startling in application. What we are aiming at is not a static political designation or detached religious ideal, but a way of life. Using this perspective as a launching point, we define disciple in the following manner: *A disciple is a lifelong follower of Jesus who is being shaped by his character and propelled by his mission.* This is so important that we should not gloss over it in order to get busy at something because there is a lot of confusion about what it means to be a disciple.

In our day, there are those who camp out on being and acting like Jesus. They emphasize things such things as justice, peace, and service. They challenge overt compulsions to pursue power at all costs and the all-too-common tendency to ignore the weak and marginalized. They reject stale religion and often mistrust any kind of authoritative structures.

Others hone in on being dedicated to taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth. They seek to make sure that people who join the movement agree on essential doctrines and moral standards. They define faithfulness as being different from the world and in fact are influencers to their respective societies.



Which are correct? Both. The problem is when we pick sides. To divorce a pervasive lifestyle from a penetrating mission is a foreign concept to the NT. Character and mission are inextricably linked, and if separated creates one-legged Christians. Based on this we define discipleship *as any process we employ that helps people become more like Jesus and be on mission with him.*

By what means do we insure that we are on the right track of achieving this balance? Our subjective feelings, personal ideals and the changing winds of our culture cannot provide us what we need to have the confidence that we are becoming faithful followers of Jesus. What we need is a fount of wisdom that we can draw from that keeps us from the twin errors of legalism and licentiousness.

That leads us to the first of five values of Disciple-Cycle: To be and make disciples we need to make sure that we are rooted in the Scripture. Hear what Paul reminded his disciple Timothy of:

*“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work”*  
(2 Tim. 3:14-17).

Paul knew that Timothy had been anchored in the Scriptures since childhood and they had helped him to become a wise follower of Jesus. Paul also reminded him that the Scriptures provide the truthful, trustworthy, and transferable basis from which we can lead a disciple-making movement.

This is good news for any person seeking to lead this process because in many ways, we don’t have to “reinvent the wheel” when it comes to making disciples. There are a plethora of great Bible studies and books on what it means to be a disciple. But when it is all said and done, it is the Word of God, mediated by the Spirit of God, through a servant of God, in the life of a child of God that helps to grow and multiply disciples.

**FOR US TO BECOME  
AND MAKE DISCIPLES  
WE NEED TO BE  
BIBLICALLY-ROOTED.**



# THE PERSONAL LANDMINES OF LEADING A DISCIPLE-MAKING MOVEMENT

If these things are true then why aren't more churches engaged in the glorious process of making disciples? We could list several things that get in the way, but for our discussion we have boiled them down to three personal landmines for pastors and five organizational dead ends that stultify a disciple-making movement.

A landmine is a spiritual stronghold that the enemy has used to keep the pastor in survival mode. Whether a personal issue or a reaction to resistance from people in their congregation, trying to bring change either feels unnecessary or too risky for the pastor. Only a renewing work of God will remedy this.

The first personal landmine is **fear**. When decline has been going on for a while, a pastor is often tempted to settle for less than a disciple-making movement. There is a sense of safety in supporting set ministries because this garners a kind of reciprocity of support that gives a pastor a false sense of ease that their job is secure.

While compromise can be a good tool a leader can use to obtain greater buy in from congregants, this is not one of those instances. Fear is like a ravenous predator that is never satisfied. The more you try to feed it to keep it at bay, the more it requires. Fear feeds greater fear. Too often pastors find out too late that their sense of safety is based on the false assumption that compromise is a one-time, static decision. Fear is not only a major stumbling block it is also a poor model for leading (Prov. 29:25; 2 Tim. 1:7).

The second personal landmine for pastors is **pride**. How does this work? Pastors think that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with their church. They believe they know what is best and don't need help from others. They tend to criticize people who are seeking to help churches as mere "theoreticians" or "talking heads." I have seen multiple situations where pastors ignore the facts associated with decline because this insulates them to the truth that they are probably part of the problem. Pride gives us a false sense of well-being (Prov. 16:18; 1 Jn 2:16).

The third personal landmine is **shame**. Pastors are down on themselves and their church, believing that their situation is hopeless. They have a hard time processing failure. They shy away from meeting with other pastors because they don't want to hear success stories and feel even more like a failure. Seeking to create a disciple-making movement feels like Sisyphus pushing the proverbial rock up the hill just to see it roll down again. They don't want to try another thing only to be disappointed again. Shame ignores the grace of God and is the opposite of faith (Ps. 22:20; 1 Pet. 2:6).

# THE CORPORATE DEAD ENDS OF LEADING A DISCIPLE-MAKING MOVEMENT

A dead end is an issue with the congregation that no matter how a pastor approaches revitalization, the effort of fixing these problems often comes to a screeching halt or dies a slow and painful death. They know from personal experience that ignoring these issues doesn't work. Neither does a full-frontal assault on the processes that stop the work of disciple-making or dethroning the people who are more worried about sustaining their power than seeing a genuine move of God take place. If a pastor keeps running into dead ends they will become cynical and will either leave or resign.

The first corporate dead end is **spiritual consumerism**. In this model of ministry more emphasis is placed on worldly definitions of success rather than faithfulness to the Lord's command. For example, we aim for the lowest common denominator like trying to get as many people to attend our Sunday Morning services instead of determining how many people are truly on mission with Jesus.

One thing the Pandemic has revealed is that spiritual consumerism is a flimsy structure on which people have built their churches. This is because it creates a culture of takers and not givers. Takers like being on the receiving end of blessings, but are not interested in getting their hands dirty or moving out in mission.

Thus, when attendance on Sunday Mornings was taken off the table, many of these types of folks either faded away or permanently opted to simply "watch" worship services from the comfort of their homes. The focus here was on personal preference. Jesus was clear when he said it is not about what you hear or know but what you do that indicates if you are a true follower of his (Matt. 7:24-27).

A second dead end is **organizational complexity**. In an effort to be organized we often create too many layers of bureaucracy that makes us more static than nimble, and it is that very thing that helps to kill movements. In this scenario we make people who are ready to engage in Kingdom work jump through too many hoops to the degree that it unmotivates them and eventually causes some kind of disconnect. Here, we value maintenance of the ministry over movement towards the mission.

Processes, standards and even to some degree, reasonable qualifications for ministry are necessary to ensure accountability and consistency in what we do (2 Tim. 2:1-2). But an over reliance upon these things can plug up your leadership pipeline to the degree that the same people end up doing the same thing with unfortunately the same results.

A third dead end is the sticky wicket of **theistic pragmatism**. Essentially, this is where we are working so hard to make following Christ practical and even easy that we take the offence of the cross off the table and water down the cost of following Jesus (Gal. 5:11; Lk. 9:23).

Theistic pragmatism focuses just on digestible principles and makes being a disciple a religious version of self-improvement. In this approach sermons and Bible studies are focused just on steps to having a better life, marriage, business, etc. While the Bible is chock full of life-enhancing principles, it is ultimately about how disciples can be part of God's magnificent and cosmic plan to reconcile people to himself through Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:18-21).

The fourth dead end or difficulty in leading a disciple-making movement is **programmatic ossification**. Programmatic ossification occurs when we rely on one particular form of Bible study as our only means to making disciples. When we do this, we limit the time, context and material that can be used to help people grow in godliness. Programmatic ossification emphasizes the gathering of particular forms of information rather than the transformation of our character. This gets us stuck in a transactional or knowledge-centered idea about discipleship rather than a comprehensive lifestyle of radical obedience.

Along these same lines, the powerful dynamic of life-on-life gets de-emphasized in lieu of making sure you complete a study or master certain skills. Ignoring the relational component means disciple-making becomes more of an intellectual enterprise rather than a lifelong journey in community with other believers who are seeking to obey Jesus (Jn. 14:21; 1 Pet. 1:22).

A fifth dead end in leading a disciple-making movement is **truncated vision**. Because disciple-making is a person-by-person enterprise, many church leaders feel that it will be too small or move too slowly to make a significant difference. It is easier to opt for large group events or launch audacious and bold programs than to allow the Holy Spirit to work slowly, methodically and deeply in people's lives.

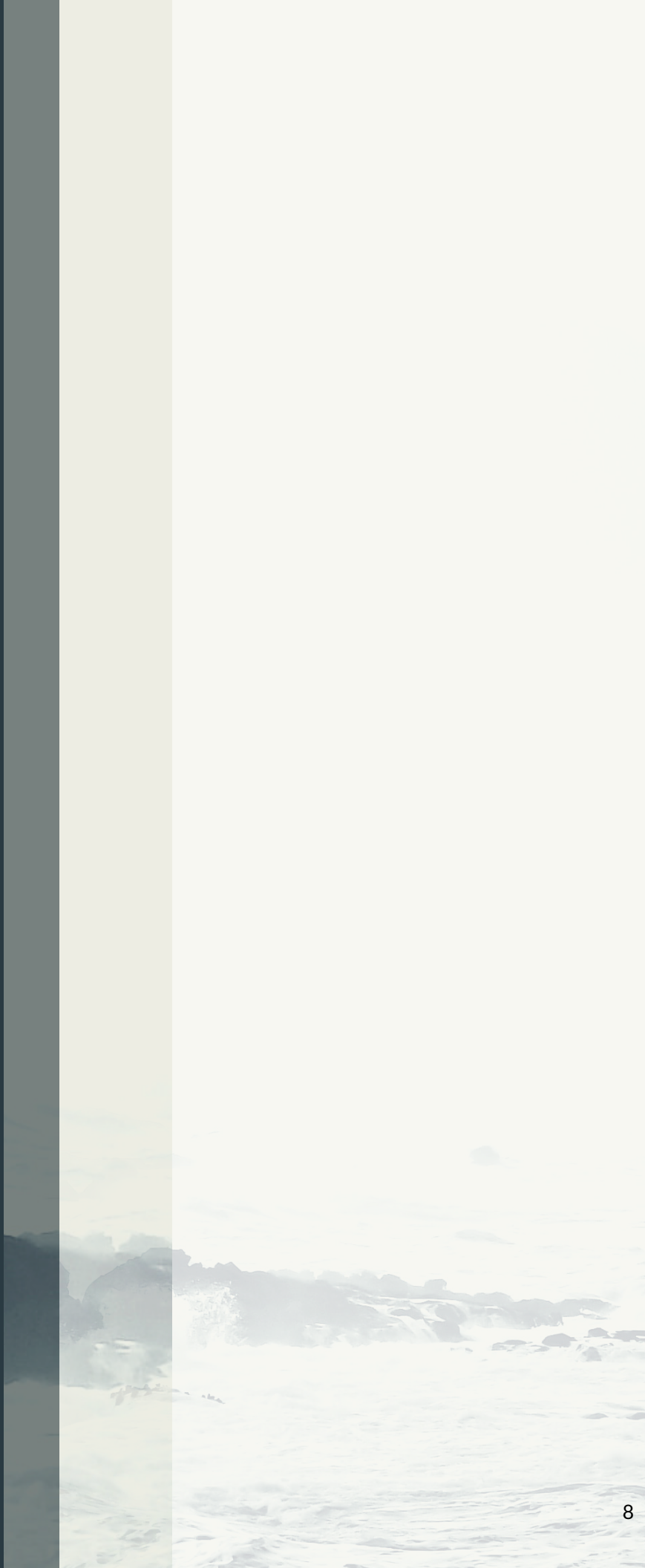
The Scripture encourages us to not lose heart and despise small, inglorious efforts because eventually the day-by-day, incremental faithfulness to the Lord's command will yield results (Zech. 4:11-12). Truncated vision causes us to not only minimize daily faithfulness, but also devalue what God can do with normal people who are committed to being part of something that is bigger than their individual strengths and weaknesses.



# A DIFFERENT APPROACH

What can we do to proactively address these challenges? Our response is not so much to just create a new program but to teach a model that represents both the means to becoming more Christ-like and the methodology for making disciples. We call this approach Disciple-Cycle. This model draws from the example of Jesus, the greatest disciple-maker of all time, and is reinforced from other biblical examples.

Using this model as our foundation, we will seek to provide information that can help to equip pastors begin right where they are in creating a reproducible approach to being part of a movement not just a ministry of disciple-making. What better time to leverage a crisis into an opportunity than now?





# QUESTIONS

1. What has God taught you through the Pandemic or any similar major crisis in your ministry?

2. Which of the three personal landmines sticks out to you as a possible problem for you in helping launch a disciple-making movement? Why?

3. Of the five listed dead ends for making disciples, which ones resonate with you the most? Why?

4. What do you think that God wants you to do about these landmines or dead ends?