

AMONG WOLVES

DISCIPLE-MAKING IN THE CITY



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DHATI LEWIS

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*For my wife and kids who have helped me embody
these principles over the years. And for my Blueprint Family,
who embraced disciple-making as central for the local church.*

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PREFACE

EVERY SUNDAY GROWING UP, I WATCHED MY FATHER PLAY football and proudly cheered him on. With a professional football player as a dad, I got to live the life few know—I had everything I could dream of as a child. I had a special talent that was similar to my father’s talent in football, and I began using it at the age of five. As I grew older, football became my god, guiding me in all my decisions and feelings. I didn’t smoke, I didn’t drink, I didn’t do anything that I perceived as detrimental to a long, healthy life of football. When football was good, I was good; but when football was bad, I was bad. Football was my idol.

After high school, some smaller colleges offered football scholarships to me, but I wanted to play football for a large school. I could not believe I wasn’t recruited by a major Division I school. That’s when I hit a low point in my life. I thought I could play for and attend a community college in California, in hopes that I might get a better offer to a major Division I college.

There was a void in my life. This became evident because when I thought about life beyond football—there wasn’t much to think through. Without football, I was left with a sense of emptiness. I didn’t know how to find my significance, because all I knew was tied up in that game. I went through a period of

searching. I began to study Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and other religions to try to find the truth. One day, my friend's mother bought me my first Bible. I started reading it the summer before my sophomore year of college, and I began attending a Christian church. I knew even though I was considered a "good guy," I was a lonely, arrogant, and self-centered man in need of help, in need of meaning, and in need of a new purpose for my life.

In my studies of religion, Christianity was the only religion that told me that I sinned and fell short of God's glory. Because of that sin, I was going to die and be judged. I realized God's standard was perfection, and I was definitely not perfect. Jesus died on the cross for my sin to satisfy God's wrath toward me because of my sin. There was nothing I could do to change that fact. I learned that I must accept the Lord by faith because a relationship with God was not something earned or deserved, but a gift. I learned Christ died on the cross for my sins and He was raised from the grave.

The Lord brought me to a point of repentance. At church, the way people "repented" was by going down to the altar and, at the time, I thought that was the only way to be saved. So one weekday, I decided that I would walk down the aisle and give my life to Christ. On the next Sunday, I transferred my trust to Christ as my Lord and Savior. That was in 1996.

In the early days after my conversion, I would hear people talk about David and Goliath and Samson and Delilah, and I would always wonder, "Who in the world are these people?"

I would go back to my dorm room and read the stories for hours on end. I felt so behind and so lost, but the desire to catch up is what actually ended up developing in me a love for God's Word. I began going to any and every Bible study I could find. I went to a different Bible study every day of the week with any campus ministry I could: FCA, Campus Crusade for Christ, Impact, and more. I wanted to learn my Word.

I also wanted my nonbelieving friends to learn about Christ. The problem came when I would invite them to these campus studies. Most times, they would not come because most of the studies were with predominantly white groups and they felt out of place. When they would come, they were unwilling to or just unable to make the cultural jump. They would give me excuses like “Man, it’s not for me” or, “Come on, man. They play an acoustic guitar.” I was left feeling helpless because I was learning about the Lord personally, but not affecting my culture.

It was when a guy asked if he could disciple me—even though I had no idea what that meant—that my life for the Lord began to take shape. I knew this man would teach me more about the Bible, so I agreed. He taught me what it meant to be proactive for the faith. Before that, my walk with the Lord was primarily a list of don’ts—don’t go to the clubs, don’t join the fraternity, don’t drink, don’t, don’t, don’t—but for the first time, I saw that God put us here with a purpose.

While I was beginning to catch the vision for the life God calls us to, I struggled to figure out how to communicate that vision to my friends. The campus ministries I was part of were mostly homogeneous. They did things a specific way with a specific style to reach a specific type of person. And ethnic minorities, the people I most connected with, didn’t look like them, talk like them, or act like them. I saw an increasing need to minister to this group of third-culture kids.

They were a unique group of students who weren’t raised in the church. They were raised by the streets in urban environments. They were raised on hip-hop, many from broken homes. At the same time, many of them were the first to make it out of the brokenness of their neighborhoods and families. The first to go to college. Not only were they minorities ethnically in a white-majority culture, but they were also minorities in their own neighborhoods as the group that was the first to leave and pursue a college education.

After their lives were changed by the gospel, they carried a deep desire to do more than just reenact what they saw at church. They authentically wanted Christ in their context. Our vision was to have a campus ministry that created space for that. We didn't want a campus ministry to compete with other campus ministries. We wanted a campus ministry to compete with the clubs.

Out of a burden to create something accessible to invite my friends to, God laid it on my heart to do something that was both culturally relevant and doctrinally sound. I, along with a couple of other college students, started a ministry on campus. God gave it favor. So much so, that by the time I graduated, we had other colleges asking me to help them start ministries on their campuses. Once I graduated, I went on staff with Impact (which is a ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ International [CRU]) and helped start ministries all over Texas. I specifically helped start ministries that were culturally relevant and doctrinally sound—meeting people where they were.

What started as the burden of a hodge-podge band of brothers trying to compete with the clubs on our own college campus, grew into a more formal identity of pastoral leaders in the local church. The burden to help start a college ministry grew into a more specific burden to plant local churches. The burden has always been about helping people form authentic and purposeful community. As we grew, we saw the amazing benefits of moving from informal gatherings to formal ones. And we learned that God called that community in a formal way, the local church. So it only made sense for us to move toward fleshing out this same burden through church-planting.

During the past twenty-plus years of full-time ministry, I have often thought about the tension of delivering relevant truth in the urban context, i.e., *Among Wolves*. Blueprint Church (where I currently pastor) was founded to create a model that seeks to solve this tension by creating a church that is both culturally relevant and doctrinally sound, while fully present in the

urban context. Blueprint would be a church that understands that disciple-making is not a ministry of the church, but it is *the* ministry of the church.

I have witnessed firsthand the power of the contextualization of the gospel in an urban context within the framework of disciple-making. I have seen how God can take a heart of stone and mold it into a heart devoted to Him. God did that in my life back in 1996, when I got involved with a group of young African-American college students who were excited about Jesus. And I believe Atlanta and other urban cities across the nation are full of men and women who are eager to know God in a way that makes sense to them.

God placed a burden on my heart, not just to plant a church in an area where it is needed, but He has placed on my heart a desire to start a movement. I wanted to plant a church that is known for its example, the blueprint that it creates; a church that provides a model for planting other healthy, culturally relevant, doctrinally sound churches. I want Blueprint not just to impact Atlanta, but to impact the world. My prayer is that my generation will be the last generation of urban practitioners forced to leave the urban context in order to be discipled. This is why I have written this book.

This book is about my story being consumed by God's story. This is not a book written for pastors. This book was written for anyone who has a burden to bring a tangible expression of the gospel into their neighborhood or network of relationships—a group of people who are willing to minister among wolves, in the most dense and diverse and difficult urban areas of our cities.

INTRODUCTION

AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM HAS BEEN BLINDSIDED.

Over the past two hundred years, our cities and our world have changed from rural to urban.¹ This has led to a much less homogeneous culture—neighbors no longer look like each other. In fact, sociologists now use two key words to describe the urban or city context—*density* and *diversity*.² This massive shift in population and increase in diversity has taken place with little impact or influence from the evangelical church. “Though 83 percent of New Yorkers are affiliated with some form of organized religion, only 4 percent identify themselves as evangelical, according to a recent study by the Values and Research Institute.”³

This current reality reveals the need to establish new tangible expressions of the gospel within the context of the density and diversity of American cities. Ignoring the rapidly evolving city context is neither wise nor prudent. This new urban, the dense and diverse cities of America, is transforming and shaping our culture, society, and neighborhoods. And when I say *our*, I mean yours too—even if you live in the suburbs, or far outside a city, this reality affects you in ways you may not even realize. More than ever, urban culture influences every community, because culture flows out of dense and diverse places into iPhones and computers and televisions in the most remote places in the world.

I stay connected to New York, Los Angeles, and Atlanta every single day, unless I actively try to avoid it. Additionally, the simple fact is that the large majority of the millions of people who live in America live in the context of city. In this book, I desire to develop a strategy that will help indigenous disciple-making in two foundational ways: (1) embrace the density and diversity of the city context, and (2) create a culture of effective disciple-making as they establish new local families in the city.

We need indigenous disciple-makers to minister in a context that has changed beneath our feet. As American cities have rapidly evolved, our churches, in many cases, have not. Just as missionaries in a foreign field effectively reach a new culture by training indigenous leaders, we need to train indigenous leaders in the urban context.

In order to equip indigenous disciple-makers, I aim to help people ministering in cities all over the United States. However, primarily, this book will outline principles learned while ministering in the Old Fourth Ward, a city-center neighborhood in Atlanta, Georgia. The Old Fourth Ward, like many up-and-coming neighborhoods, is experiencing transition. Blueprint Church serves this historic neighborhood; I serve as the lead planter and pastor of this church. By definition, a blueprint is a plan/process that is used as a guide to start something new. The principles learned ministering in the Old Fourth Ward will help shape the principles applied in the book. Therefore, much of the research that undergirds this project will be based on ministry that has been taking place in the Old Fourth Ward.

Among Wolves will address the urbanization and globalization that is upon us. Urbanization will impact those living in the city, as well as those living in the suburbs and rural areas. Sociologists Gottdiener and Hutchinson explain, “At the beginning of the twenty-first century, more than 3 billion persons—about half of the world’s population—lived in urban areas. By 2030, this number is expected to increase from 3 to more than 5 billion persons—some 60 percent of the total world population. This will

be the first urban century in human history.”⁴ For the first time in human history, more people are living in or near a city than they are in rural or suburban areas.

With this reality, cities are becoming dense pockets of people—people from rural areas, people from the suburbs, people from around the globe, and people indigenous to the city. In some cases, urban sprawl is taking over areas now considered towns and suburbs. The same sociologists continue, “Most of the U.S. population is urban . . . fewer people each year live within the large central cities that were the population foci of the past. Instead, what we now call home is the expanding regions of urbanization that are associated with an ever-changing array of cities, towns, suburbs, and exurban areas.”⁵

Among Wolves will take an in-depth look at the book of Matthew as we explore what doing ministry in the density and diversity of the city looks like. The growth of cities around the world has caused more cultural interaction and intersection in ways that have previously never happened. In Hong Kong and China, CNN reports, “Hip-hop is quickly becoming the most popular style of music across Asia, even eclipsing today’s big rock acts.”⁶ The impact of globalization in our cities has affected all people groups. For example, inner-city kids can be seen riding skateboards while suburban/rural kids are following the hip-hop culture. According to *Vibe Magazine*, “The hip-hop-ization of skateboarding began with the skate-park boom of the late 1970s. . . . Skateboarding soon took root in urban streets, parking lots, schools, and public plazas.”⁷ The urban sprawl is forcing people groups and cultures to interact in ways previously unseen.

People connect with people who live in a similar reality to their own. Based on their research findings, the British Psychological Society argues that people like being around others who are similar to them because there is a greater chance to forge friendships or romance.⁸ This study illustrates that meaning in life is determined by a shared list of codes, slangs, and/or mannerisms more so than even those who live in the same area or community. This

detachment from a parish community or suburban enclave has put the individual at the center, rather than being held together by a geographic location. Culture is no longer geographically bound.

Cities are not only diverse culturally, but also socioeconomically. In urban settings, in a one-mile area, one can see extreme poverty intertwined with extreme wealth. This disparity can result in an “us” versus “them” mentality. People naturally form identities in groups according to their economic status. And these groups, living side by side, live in a state of conflict.

Often, one side tries to extinguish the community on the other side of the proverbial “railroad tracks”:

Stratification is often pictured as a pyramid of social standing. Those at the top control most of the society’s resources; they also enjoy the most symbolic prestige and political influence. Those below are the most numerous and have the least power. The United States, despite an active ideology that preaches equality, in fact has the most unequal distribution of wealth of any industrialized nation (Philips, 1988). The top one percent of the population controls over 70 percent of the wealth, and the top 5 percent control over 90 percent.⁹

If indigenous disciple-makers are going to lead communities in these neighborhoods, they must be able to carefully navigate the dimensions of urbanization. This book seeks to help practitioners think critically and contextually, in order to have an effective gospel impact in the complexity of the current urban context.

OUR REALITY: UNITY IN GENTRIFYING CONTEXT

Historically, the church has not done any better than secular organizations when it comes to bringing unity among people from different cultures. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. coined

the statement years ago—“Sunday is the most segregated day of the week”—as he was speaking against the reality of the Jim Crow laws, the practice of segregating blacks in the US. Almost fifty years later, although Jim Crow has been abolished as the law of the land, people in society still have a long way to go in abolishing those kinds of laws in their hearts.

Recent events, at the time of writing this book, like those involving Alton Sterling or Philando Castile, and hate-filled statements against a people based on race like those of Donald Sterling, former owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, remind us that racism and prejudice are still a part of our culture and even in our hearts. The United States is still very fragile when dealing with some of the realities that come with urbanization. If this type of belief could be relegated to a small minority of people who are still stuck in the racism of the fifties and sixties, then the need for concern would be lessened. However, we are reminded by people who claim, “Let’s make America great again,” that these issues did not stay in the last century. That statement alone is a slap in the face to those who were under oppression during the “great” times to which they were referring. Although it may be painful to admit, if we are willing to be honest with ourselves and our society, it is not difficult to see that, no matter our ethnicity, we all are practicing bigots and demonstrate our prejudice in one way or another.¹⁰

The city of Atlanta’s slogan, “A City Too Busy to Hate,” is being put to the test due to gentrification. Ten to twenty years ago, urban was thought of primarily in terms of inner-city, homogeneous, black, and poor. Density and diversity were not descriptors used in regard to urban. The new dense and diverse urban is upon us because of gentrification. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, *gentrification* is “the process of renovating and improving a house or a district so that it conforms to middle-class taste.” Many people have their opinions about the pros and cons of gentrification. The reality is, gentrification is happening and is impacting our cities, for better or worse. I will

summarize its impact with three key words—relocation, redevelopment, and reorientation.

First, *relocation* happens when the natives of a community are decentralized to a different community. (Usually this is done to make room for the new urban settlers.) Relocating causes a lot of anxiety in the community because it creates an “us” versus “them” mentality. Many times the native community fights to remain in their lifelong homes. On the other hand, the gentrified community fights for safety and increasing property values in the patch of community they now call home.

Second, relocation brings *redevelopment*. The middle to upper-middle class are accustomed to a certain standard of living. In pursuit of this, old homes are renovated, or entire communities are overhauled in order to erect bigger and grander homes than what once existed. These redevelopment endeavors are usually manifested in renovating homes, opening bars, clubs, and local trendy restaurants. Cities across America are facing the challenges of gentrification, and the Old Fourth Ward is no different.

Finally, *reorientation* happens when both the natives and the gentrified community learn how to live in harmony with one another. This concept is hard for most of us, mainly because of fear. It is not a fear of the unknown; it is fear of what we think can happen or what we have seen happen in the past. The fear for the native community is losing what they have called home for so many years or not being accepted by their new neighbors. The fear for the gentrified community is being physically harmed, their homes being broken into, or their newly acquired property being devalued. In the midst of this tension, the church can make a great impact on the community. Paul points to this reality in his letter to the Ephesians,

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments

expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (Eph. 2:14–16)

We have the ability to show our neighbors how, in Christ, we are able to live in harmony, peace, and love in the midst of our brokenness and differences.

ATLANTA AS A CASE STUDY

The Old Fourth Ward garners national attention around gentrification for two reasons. First, the renovation of the old Sears building is a premier symbol of gentrification. In 2011, work began on this 2.1-million-square-foot building, formerly known as City Hall East, with desires of turning it into a live, work, play space called Ponce City Market. This renovation and vision draws people from Metro Atlanta and the United States to move into city life and into this neighborhood.

The second reason Atlanta is receiving so much attention around the topic of gentrification is the state of the Boulevard corridor. In the 1890s the Boulevard was described as “one of the most desirable residence streets in the city.”¹¹ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. lived off of Boulevard and influenced the Civil Rights Movement from this very street. Unfortunately, for the past several decades, Boulevard has been known as the center of crime and drug activity in Atlanta, as well as the highest concentration of Section 8 housing inside the perimeter of the city.¹²

While many people are attracted to the Old Fourth Ward because Ponce City Market, many are fighting for the socio-economic betterment of the Bedford Pines community (the neighborhood with a majority of the Section 8 Housing). Some might credit Dr. King with igniting this flame for unity in the context of diversity, but this call to fight for unity started over two thousand years ago with Jesus commissioning His church

to walk in a manner worthy of His name. *Among Wolves* will, hopefully, demonstrate how our churches can walk in unity in the midst of diversity.

THE AIMS OF THIS BOOK

The book was written to develop men and women within the urban context, and come alongside these practitioners to develop and defend a culture of disciple-making. To define the term, a *practitioner* is someone who is actively engaged with or “practicing” the issues at hand. If you live in a community with people who are different from you, then *you* are a practitioner! As the pastor of a church in the heart of an urban context, I have felt these challenges of doing ministry. Even in the midst of the challenges and joys, we remain committed to being an answer to the prayer of Matthew 9:37–38, when Jesus called His disciples to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out more laborers.

The aims of *Among Wolves* are four-fold:

1. **Gospel-Centered:** *Among Wolves* aims to help practitioners develop a deeper devotion for the person and work of Christ through His Word. Throughout the book, we will allow the Gospel of Matthew to be our guide. This Gospel begins with the burden to establish God’s tangible presence and ends with a confirmation of His presence and commission to continue the family’s business.
2. **Local Church-Based:** *Among Wolves* aims to equip practitioners to make disciples within the context of the local church. Urban practitioners will develop an understanding of the identity of the church as family, allowing that to shape the activities of their local gathering. This can be applied in multiple contexts, such as Bible study groups, missional communities, and small groups—anywhere you seek to co-labor with other believers.

3. **Disciple-Making Oriented:** *Among Wolves* aims to equip the practitioner to see disciple-making, not as *a* ministry, but as *the* ministry of the local church.
4. **Urban-Focused:** *Among Wolves* aims to help the practitioner navigate through the beauty, complexity, density, and diversity that city-life brings.

BOOK OVERVIEW

The following is an overview of the eight movements of Matthew we will cover:

MOVEMENT 1: VISION FROM BURDEN

God's vision for your life is all about you and not about you at all. Understanding God's story, your personal story, the story of people around you, and the story of your city will help you discover what God is specifically asking of you.

MOVEMENT 2: ESTABLISHING FAMILY

The church is not like a family, it is a family in which God is our Father, Jesus is our elder brother, and we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

MOVEMENT 3: ENTERING THE MISSION

As we enter God's mission, God allows trials, temptations, and spiritual warfare as a means to prepare us for ministry, to instill in us greater discipline, and to draw us into deeper dependency on the Father.

MOVEMENT 4: FRAMING DISCIPLE-MAKING

Disciple-making is *our* capacity to lovingly transmit and embody the life of Jesus through the life of His followers. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a church to raise a

Christian. Disciple-making is not *a* ministry of the church, it is *the* ministry of the church.

**MOVEMENT 5: A CALL TO DISCIPLE-MAKING:
A CALL TO LABOR**

God's presence is the fuel that empowers us to be fully committed to His call, to live fully as those sent to be sheep among wolves.

MOVEMENT 6: TRAINING FROM SERVICE

Laboring for the harvest is a critical part of our sanctification and growth, it moves us to compassion, reinforces our identity, reminds us of our inadequacy, compels us to pray, and it ultimately an act of obedience to our call to live radical, countercultural lives.

MOVEMENT 7: MOBILIZING CORPORATELY FOR MISSION

If we are to mobilize corporately for mission, we must hold to a compelling vision of Christ's call, move away from the anti-vision, resist uniformity, and move together in unity.

MOVEMENT 8: UNLEASHING DISCIPLE-MAKERS

In obedience to our Preeminent Christ, we pursue the Great Commission's call for us to make disciples in our jobs, our homes, and our neighborhoods—all with the goal of recapturing those arenas as vital gospel ground. We fulfill the Great Commandment while we do the Great Commission.

Our goal is simple: *We want to be the last generation forced to leave the urban context in search of solid discipleship.*