

VOL. 11 • NO.2 FALL 2020

BOOK REVIEW

Comer, Gary S. *ReMission: Rethinking How Church Leaders Create Movement*. New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2018. 336 pp.

Reviewed by Jim Roden. He has a passion for church revitalization and is currently the lead pastor at The Journey Church in Tucson, Arizona. He is also working on a D.Min. at Talbot School of Theology. He earned his M.Div. from Western Seminary and B.A. from The Master's University.

After 23 years of modest success at making disciples, I admit that I'm not satisfied with what I've seen so far. Perhaps you share my desire to see a more effective disciple-making movement in our churches. It is into this lack of effective disciple-making movements that Gary Comer writes *ReMission*. *ReMission* is Comer's sixth book. Not only has he addressed

this issue head on: he proposes solid ideas to work from. *ReMission* is a big book in many ways, but Comer has struck gold and shares the wealth with us.

Comer has been a church planter, a regional church planting coach, and an outreach pastor at a flourishing innovative church in Southern California. Comer is a lifelong learner with a doctorate from Talbot Seminary in “Planting and Multiplying Healthy Churches in North America.” He is an evangelism guru and the founder of Soul Whisperer Ministries, which helps churches develop missionally.

The first two chapters address the decline of North American churches, offer a clear and compelling diagnosis of the underlying problem, and outline Comer’s remedy for what is destroying our churches. Chapter one points out that church leaders mistakenly think missional living automatically emerges when churches become healthy. Comer argues the exact opposite. Chapter two argues that church leaders have been asleep at the wheel. Comer believes that church leaders commit two primary errors in the disciple-making endeavor. First, church leaders oversimplify the complexity that is the disciple-making process. Second, most church leaders are reluctant to evaluate current methods and adopt new ones. His argument is that even if there is some success taking place, the good should never be allowed to upstage the best. We should never settle for modest outcomes if more could be accomplished.

The rest of *ReMission* is divided into four major parts. *Part I—Culture: Shaping Their Interface* forms what Comer believes to be the essentials of creating a disciple-making movement. In four chapters Comer describes *The Pattern*, *The Permeation*, *The Posture*, and *The Process* of a disciple-making movement. These are the pillars of Comer’s discipleship culture and will be discussed in a moment.

Part II—Channel: Empowering Their Influence is two chapters long. Chapter seven, *Tipping the Tower*, is about the need for servant leaders who share the leadership of a discipleship movement with the laity. Nonprofessionals must be brought into the design and process. They must own the mission and be allowed to be the primary movers. Chapter eight, *Pinpointing the Flow*, offers solid training on culturally relevant, effective, relational evangelism.

Part III—Course: Charting Their Instruction consists of six chapters. Chapter nine, *Your Path Design*, establishes the kind of layering and redundancy required to develop a disciple-making movement. Comer introduces a graphic which demonstrates six discipleship issues that must be addressed if churches want to produce healthy, functional, and fruitful disciples: spiritual formation, authenticity, community, knowledge, mission, and stewardship (184).

Chapters ten through thirteen titled *Step In*, *Step On*, *Step Up*, and *Step Out* develop these six areas of discipleship development into four stages of ever-increasing discipleship breadth and depth. Chapter fourteen, *Leading Legacies*, is designed to inspire leaders through Comer's personal experience. It identifies the challenge of leading in church *ReMission*. It is designed to be a final charge that inspires readers to give themselves to the worthy cause of revitalizing North American churches.

ReMission ends with two smaller sections. *Afterword—In The Trenches of Remissioning* contains practical wisdom on how to catalyze, organize, and lead an effective multiplying discipleship movement. The *Addenda* contains three helpful appendices on ministering to Muslims, a list of top ten evangelism skills, and a detailed graphic of Comer's "path model."

In my estimation, there are three very powerful portions of *ReMission*. Chapter one is first on my list. I agree with Comer's position that churches are pursuing the wrong strategy because they misunderstand the central problem. This is where *ReMission* really shines. Comer stirs his readers, getting them to feel something about the problem. Here Comer states his most poignant idea. At the heart of *ReMission* is this: get on mission with Jesus and you will make more and better disciples. Discipleship without mission is not even real discipleship.

Comer's premise at the heart of the book – his "whopping billion-dollar idea" – is that "health flows out of mission rather than mission being the by-product of health... You may have heard this mantra: 'Make disciples and you will get mission.' I'm arguing just the opposite: *Do mission to get disciples*" (27). "Give your people viable mission, and you will have given them a means to spiritual life and health as they become true disciples of Jesus" (28).

I heartily endorse Comer's assessment. Readers who won't embrace

this central concept will miss the value of the book. If they embrace it, *ReMission* will not only inspire them but guide them in mapping out a path toward a disciple-making movement.

The second most important contribution of *ReMission* is what I call the core of Comer's system. It is found in chapters three through six, all which fall under the section heading *Part I—Culture: Shaping Their Interface*. It is my opinion that the content of these four chapters make up the greatest practical contribution of *ReMission*. These four chapters are convincing, engaging, and inspiring.

Chapter three, *The Pattern*, is a theological treatise on why becoming a reproducing disciple of Jesus is the number one most important mandate of all believers. In order to be real disciples of Jesus we must be on mission. Jesus himself was single-minded in his mission to “seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). He said, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). Comer argues, “Contrary to Christ's example, we have come to define ‘disciple’ by such criteria as knowledge, behavior, and fellowship, whereas Jesus saw discipleship as the embodiment of his heart, actions, skills, and fruit. . . . Because of this misappropriation, we now have a pandemic of isolated Christians feverishly studying their Bible but neither living what their Bibles are calling them toward nor seeing Scripture from a lens that distinguishes Jesus' methods in a transferable way” (64).

In chapter four, *The Permeation*, Comer warns that developing an effective disciple-making movement requires more than good preaching. Preaching may catalyze missional disciple making, but much more is required. Leading this kind of movement will, of necessity, be layered and nuanced. This has been my first hand experience as well.

Chapter five, *The Posture*, is a call to humility and authenticity in our approach to evangelism. Instead of focusing primarily on how godly we are, we must focus on grace, transformation, and authenticity. We must be real and transparent about our weaknesses and deficiencies as we attempt to reach people and disciple them for Jesus. A humble posture is disarming and creates Christians and church cultures that sinners and outsiders are far more likely to engage with and feel as if they belong. Again, I completely agree.

Chapter six, *The Process*, is where *ReMission* begins to get practical... and convicting. Up to this point, *ReMission* is mostly inspiring theory. This is where the hard work begins. Here he lays out the nuts and bolts of what it takes to develop and perfect a robust and systematic discipleship process. “Someone is going to have to play the role of engineer and foreman so that what is accomplished is productive instead of counterproductive. Shortcuts will tempt you, as will the tendency to default to former ways. Don’t give in! If you avoid cutting corners, it will save you far more in the long run” (117).

The third significant contribution of *ReMission* is found in chapters ten through thirteen of *Section III—Charting Their Instruction*. Comer’s agenda is to move church leaders from a simple linear disciple-making paradigm to a deeply layered and nuanced approach in order to help people reach their full Kingdom potential. This is the opposite of the *Simple Church* concept and more realistically approximates my real-life experience in church leadership. I have been challenged and inspired to take discipleship at my church closer to Comer’s model.

ReMission is thick and complex. If you want lots of pages for your money, *ReMission* will not disappoint. If you’re busy and need something more concise, *ReMission* could be simplified. Comer’s writing style is riveting, and the message of *ReMission* is spot on. Its length and complexity, however, are challenging. Some readers will feel overwhelmed. I have read it three times; only now am I understanding how it all works together. My recommendation would be to shorten and simplify it for pastors who are pressed for time. Perhaps chapter two could be abbreviated and added to chapter one. Perhaps chapter seven, *Tipping the Tower*, could be eliminated or added to another since the main concept of discipleship being a lay-led movement is implicit in the book. I understand Comer’s agenda here, but perhaps he could have said it more simply. As wonderful as chapter eight is, *Pinpointing the Flow*, which is all about effective relational evangelism, perhaps most of it has been covered in Comer’s *Soul Whisperer*. I believe these recommendations would help simplify *ReMission*, enabling busy leaders to pick up the clear flow of thought more readily.

ReMission is well written, engaging, and provocative. What Comer offers is convincing, convicting, and hopeful. His agenda is to unapologetically

point out that we're losing as North American churches, but he doesn't want to leave us there. He wants to give us hope. He wants to draw us in, inspire us, and give us a path forward. *ReMission* is a must read for anyone who is serious about getting churches back online and working to fulfill the Great Commission of Jesus Christ, and it has changed the way I see my mission.