



Coach Approach Ministries Podcast

Episode 76: How George Became a Denominational Coach

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[Intro Music]

Brian: I'm Brian Miller, Strategic Director for Coach Approach Ministries, CAM for short, and I'm joined here today by George Howard. George is the Executive Director of Global Coaching and Strategic Initiatives. That's a title I think I might die for. I mean, what more do you want in a title? Global Coaching and Strategic Initiatives, I like every word in there, and he does that for the Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. George, we're so glad to have you on the podcast today.

George Howard: Brian, it's good to be here. It's always great to talk to people about coaching and learn from each other, so I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you.

Brian: Well, I think our listeners are going to enjoy this. You just have a presence about you. There are people like that, who have a presence, and you just feel like man, I'm lucky to sit and listen to this guy for a few minutes. Our listeners not only get to listen to you, but I get a little extra. I get to ask you questions. So, I'm in a great seat today, George.

George: Take it away.

Brian: Alright. So, you got into coaching really early. You were a very early adopter. We're talking late 1990's, and I want to know how you first heard about coaching.

George: There's a pastor in Ohio who I worked with who's a volunteer with the conference, with the regional body that I was with, and he had gone online to do some research about supporting pastors across the States. He came and brought this idea to us about coaching, and I didn't know what it was, so

[Transcribed by Alyssa Miller](#)

he began to spell it out. He had found a program, a training program in western North Carolina that was being led by Linda Miller and Jane Creswell, two founders of CAM. So, we began to have some conversations with them about training and about coaching and its applicability within the church.

Brian: So, if I'm hearing you right, you and this other fellow were very early adopters. You just have that mindset about you. This is the late 90's, and he's Googling how to do church better. We might do that today somewhat naturally, but in late 1990's, it took some forethought, and you had to have some imagination to think there was anything valuable here. As soon as he found something, he quickly brought it to your attention, said, "This might be something we should check into," and you went in with the idea of adopting this into ministry, not just skeptically checking it out. So, I'm hearing a lot of early adopter in you.

George: Actually, there's a third person in this conversation, and we knew if we kept doing things the way we were, then churches of Christ would continue to decline, the majority of them. So, we had to do something different. That's why we started doing the research.

Brian: Got you. So, you and two others go to this training in western North Carolina, and as the training starts, and this was a long time ago, almost 20 years ago, I don't know how well you remember it, but thinking back, they start talking about coaching, and your thoughts were what?

George: If I may back up just a touch?

Brian: Sure.

George: Before we went, we had a telephone interview. There was an application process for this training, and in that, they asked us a series of questions, just to get to know us and to feel what kind of leaders we were, and in the midst of that, they said, "Yes, come." I asked the question, "Why do you want us to come?" They said, "Because you've got the characteristics, you've got the DNA of coaches," and what that meant to them, and to me, as we discovered was there are different styles of leadership, and the coaching style of leadership was to come alongside as opposed to being directive. We asked good questions. We were listening. So, when we came to the training, Brian, that's when I discovered there were basic skills of coaching, and we had them all. What Jane said, at one point, was, "A, we all have them, and B, the job of the training was to increase our capacity. So, it was affirming to think that I already had these skills, and the job was to get better at them.

Brian: That was so smart of Jane and Linda. It sounds like Jane and Linda. If my history is right, this is the first years of them doing this kind of training in the Christian world. They both had been coaches in secular settings, and they, because they're both Christians, they wanted to bring these tools into the kingdom of God, and I'm glad they did because they're so effective and helpful. They looked for early adopters. You've done a lot of training, and I bet you've had the same experience I had that when you're in those first couple hours of training, talking about coaching, you've got two or three students who are going, "I don't know about this. This doesn't sound right at all."

George: You're exactly right.

Brian: And I learned early because when I first started training, there'd be tension in the room for the first half day, if I was doing a two day training, and at lunch, I'd be sitting there thinking what am I doing

wrong? They're not getting it. There's so much tension. Then I realized that for people who don't come naturally, like you did, into it, if there's not tension, we're not doing it right because we're not explaining it well enough that they think this is something different, but you were an early adopter. It just felt right to you, and it was equipping you with tools and ideas that just really made you... Well, I don't want to keep using analogies here, but it made you better.

George: Absolutely.

Brian: I love it.

George: And the other thing I learned, at least one thing I've learned is, George Bullard has taken the coaching and adapted it for the context that he was experiencing in Western North Carolina, and he merged it with some of the trainings, the programs, the church development stuff that he was doing. That wasn't applicable for me. I was at the training with the rest of the folks, but what my insight was that I could take this coaching back to Ohio, back to the United Methodist Church, and I could adapt it inside of my context. I could use it within the systems and the structures of the strategies that we were developing there. That was exciting.

Brian: That is something I absolutely love about coaching is that not only is it adaptable, but it helps adapt other things into the context of your ministry. In the late 1990's in Ohio, there would have been some diversity among congregations, but in 2017, congregations are as diverse as there are congregations. So, this idea that coaching is so adaptable and brings its effectiveness no matter what the culture, which is another conversation I want to have with you at another time, about cross-cultural coaching, but that is it. Is there anything else about that first training that really stands out to you that changed your thinking?

George: It was just affirming of the research that my colleague had done, and we were ready to take it back and figure out how do you translate it back into our context?

Brian: I love it. So, you came back, and the nice thing is the guy you were working for was there with you, so you didn't have to explain it to him. He already was on board and up to speed. So many people, even today, go to a training like this, take copious notes, fill it up, they love it, they put it on the bookshelf, and then things get so busy that maybe six months to a year later, they're wondering, I wonder if there's something in that book I took notes on, and then they can't find the book. That's not what happened with you, George. You took it and run with it. What was in place that made you guys take this and do something with it?

George: Well first of all, Brian, I've got notebooks on my shelf that I know exactly where they are that I haven't opened in years. That's exactly true. One of the key differences in this is while we were going through the training, we met a colleague of Jane and Linda's and invited her to work with me, to coach me, so the implementation began to happen. So, I walked away, I came back, I had everything on my desk, I had all the phone calls and all of that. A week later, I get a phone call from my coach saying, "Are you ready to begin?" So, that was a key for me. I hired a coach to come work with me to begin to design this new system. That was one, and the other thing you made me think of was because Stan Ling, my boss, a pastor from west Ohio, because he was there...

Brian: Stan Lee? The guy that invented Marvel Comics? Is that what you said? Stan Lee?

George: Ling. L-I-N-G.

Brian: Oh, that's different. Never mind. Go ahead and say what you were saying. I got excited there for a minute.

George: But he would enjoy Marvel comics.

Brian: Yes!

George: But if you're trying to introduce something into your culture, there are natural resistance forces. So, Stan, as my boss, helped me navigate the territory, and he did some work in front of me, and behind me, and beside me. He really helped set me up to succeed in introducing coaching.

Brian: The best thing I did to make me move from an amateur coach to a professional coach, to implement it, was hire a mentor coach. It's really, too, an inside mental thing when you're thinking, so now I'm going to pay somebody a pretty good check, bigger than the check I wrote for the training, to coach me an hour a week, a month, or whatever, and that's going to change everything? Because I wrote the check, it bought me in. It said if I'm willing to write a check, that means other people would find what I'm doing as valuable, but just the mentoring, that just set it apart. I'm glad you said that as a piece, and also, in an organization, there needs to be a culture among the leadership, and you're probably seeing this in churches as well. The leadership has to support the idea in order for it to take off.

George: That's right, and I'm also a believer that I go where the openings are. So, across the region that I was responsible for, there were 14 sub-regions, and in some of them, I just had no traction, so I didn't worry about it. I went to the three or four where I did get traction and began to develop a culture there, and the funny thing is, and this was years ago that we started this, but some of those had the greatest resistance, now are bringing coaches in. Now.

Brian: 20 years later.

George: 15, 18 years later. They think this is good stuff.

Brian: There's always those churches that are 20 years behind, and in many denominations, we celebrate them because they're not the ones who are 50 years behind, so I know the feeling, and I think most people do. So, you've changed your language here already. You're talking about creating a culture of coaching in these regions of what ends up being western Ohio, where you're at at the time. What are a couple things you did where you linked with where the open doors were to create that culture?

George: Culture of coaching is something that I've come to since then. When I got started, I was looking for who's ready. So, I began talking to some pastors, pastors who I had a relationship with, and many of them, Brian, they felt that, whether they were in an urban or rural context, they felt that they were alone and isolated. I mean, we had 1,200 churches across west Ohio. In some cases, they were right across the street from each other, but they experience themselves as alone. So, I offered coaching, and those that took me up on it is where we began. That began to build some energy around coaching, and then they began to be ambassadors, and then we began to offer some training. So, it's the path of least resistance, where can I get started, and at the same time, I was working at the local level across the conference. I began some conversations with our superintendents who were responsible for multiple churches, and at one point, we brought in some trainers to do some training, just some basic training,

introductory training for those superintendents. Not that they ever would become trainers or coaches but so that they spoke the language. When I use the word coach, they would understand that I'm not talking about a fitness coach. When we talk about coaching, it was not about coming in and fixing people. I understood that these leaders were creative, resourceful, and whole, and I was coming alongside them to make their dreams come true.

Brian: There you are again, and the idea of creating culture. You're bringing in the superintendents, so they can be insiders, so they can be supporting and encouraging of the language, so they understand what it is. You're a pretty smart cookie, George. I'm figuring that out pretty quick here. So, my next question goes along with that. What kind of cookie are you? Are you an Oreo? Are you a gingersnap? That's probably a dumb question.

George: I love oatmeal raisin. Does that make me an oatmeal raisin cookie?

Brian: It's kind of wrinkled up. It's delicious, but it's not that pretty to look at. I have no idea what that means, George. I got us off track, and I apologize. Maybe that's a halfway through the podcast wakeup call. I hope so. So, you did some training, and how was the training you offered compared to the training you took initially?

George: It was very similar, but it wasn't five-day's worth. It was a day and a half's worth. It was just to help create the understanding, but if they understood what I was doing with their pastors... Afterwards, some of them came up to me and said, "I want you to work with so-and-so, and so-and-so, and so-and-so," and I said, "Why?" They said, "Well, because we're going to move them out of ministry if they don't do something different." So, from the beginning, they saw it as a way to fix people, and I kept going back, and I said, "No. I want to talk to pastors who are in a new appointment. I want to talk to pastors who are starting new churches. I wasn't to talk to pastors who are receiving a grant from the conference, and all of a sudden, they're opening up a new opportunity." I kept trying to set the context, and some of them got it, and some of them didn't.

Brian: We always see that for sure. So, what's next? If you move this thing up a couple years, you've got some people in initial training. What did they do with it? How did they implement any of that into their own church after they got some training?

George: So, I offered training for the superintendents to see if they would understand, but those aren't the people I wanted to train. Then, once they understood it, I then recruited with them a group of pastors and lay-people from across the conference to bring together for coach training because I'm one person, and I had a full-time job, and coaching was only a piece of it. If we had 900 pastors, I wasn't going to get very far. How do you replicate yourself? We began to develop a cadre of a couple of dozen of pastors and leaders who could then do coaching. We offered them free coaching, no charge. The conference paid for it if they would commit to coaching people for the next two years, and I didn't really care if they went out and found the people to coach or they called me and said, "Can you give me three names," because we were trying to build the awareness and extend it. So, it happened in a variety of ways. They found their own. They called, and I said, "We've got these three new church starts. Can you coach one of those pastors," or those who received conference grants, we finally built it into our understanding that if you were going to get money from the conference, we would only give it to you if you had a coach working with you. So, we were able to partner together from a variety of perspectives.

Then, the superintendents would say, “Here’s a strategic church.” Then I loved it because they got it. I’d say they want to go to the next level. They’re at 140, and they want to get to 200, or they’re at 50, and they want to get to 75. They’re ready, or at least they thought they were ready.

Brian: So, at first, they wanted you to work with remedial, and if I’m hearing you right, that’s not what it was about, but you did work with them. You worked with the ones who were about to lose their positions. You worked with them and helped them, and maybe that earned you the right to then work with the strategic churches. Is that fair?

George: That is fair. Though, even when I agreed to work with those that were in a remedial situation, I made it very clear to the supervisor that this was not my priority, that I was doing this as a favor to them but that the next time they called me, I wanted one of their frontrunners. I wanted one of the other pastors.

Brian: I love it. I love the way you’re constantly setting expectations as you’re continuing to work. That’s such a good strategy. Let me ask you, we’re nearing the end here, if you had it to do all over again today, you’re starting from scratch. Maybe you Googled it, you went to a training, and you’re going to implement this in a similar kind of culture, this denominational, regional type of culture, or even maybe a national type of culture, what would you do different today?

George: Excellent question. We’re in a different place today than we were 20 years ago, or 15 years ago.

Brian: Hopefully.

George: Or 10 years ago. There are a lot more people in multiple denominations. Not only do I work with United Methodist, I work with Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and across the board, denominations are understanding coaching differently, if they understand it at all. So, what I’d say to somebody starting out is don’t go by yourself. Invite the training to you. Put together a dozen or 20 people. Start with a significant core, and that takes a little longer, so maybe you go out and buy a dozen books, and you give them to some of your colleagues, and say, “Read this, and then I want to have a conversation with you,” so that when you do begin to launch a new initiative around coaching, you’ve got some energy around it, some drive behind it, and you’ve already begun to influence the culture before you step out there day one.

Brian: Yeah, there’s a breaking point. That’s not the exact word I want to use, but if you’re going to send five people to training, after that, you could almost bring a trainer in and bring as many as you want in. You can pay for it differently. You don’t have to pay per student. You could just pay a trainer and get a lot of people trained. I’ve found, also within those organizations, if it’s a church, that just the coach training causes them, to practice coaching, you have to have great conversations, and they just end up having the best conversations about vision, and future, who they are, where they want to go. That can be a real catalyst as well, just as a byproduct of good coach training. I love those pieces too.

George: Absolutely. I think the word you’re looking for is “tipping point.”

Brian: Something like that, yeah.

George: It begins to tip the scale for this new movement, this new awareness that you’re trying to create.

Brian: That's a great summary of all the things you did. You brought it in as a culture, and you looked for opportunities to tip. Who would give me the best leverage to tip this thing a little further. I'll do the remedial stuff, but next time, we'll tip it forward, and you'll give me somebody who's about to make a breakthrough. George, this has just been so much fun.

George: Brian, the other thing I'd say is that I also learned the hard way. I learned from my mistakes, so part of what you're hearing is what I'd have done differently or the places where I actually succeeded, as opposed to some of the conversations I had with leaders who said, you've got to be joking.

Brian: You're giving me the best part of the history. You're the winner, and you get to tell the history, so you tell it the way you want to. That happens a lot, doesn't it?

George: Sure it does.

Brian: George, it's just been so much fun to have talked to you today, and I know you've got other coaching stories, and I'm really interested. Is there any chance I could get you back another day, and you tell me some more stories?

George: Brian, this is fun. I enjoy it, so the answer is yes because what you and I both are about is to continue to expand this within the church, the big church.

Brian: So, if anyone wants to get ahold of George, the best way to do so is his email, and I'll try to say it slow. We'll put a link on the website. goward@umcmmission.org. I just want to thank everybody for joining us today. Don't miss any of our podcasts. Subscribe to our podcast at iTunes, or at Google Play, soon to be on Stitcher by searching for Coach Approach Ministries Podcast. We'll see you next week.

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