

Culture and the Church's Discipleship Strategy

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INTRODUCTION

A trip to the local Christian bookstore will reveal the popularity of church growth material and discipleship resources. Pastors and church leaders are interested in learning new approaches to ministry and are quick to buy the next best-selling, tried and proven, effective method to guarantee ministry success. With all that is available to help the church leader in his ministry and with so many programs offered to build Christian growth, families should be well-off in their pursuit of spiritual maturity. So how does the landscape look as believers have made their attempt to proclaim the truth of the gospel? Unfortunately, not so good.

Jim Putman states, "American Christians are not on a mission. They look far more like the world than they should. They live the same way and chase the same things. Their marriages and families look the same. They are biblically illiterate and care little about sharing their faith with others. Churches are producing people who do not and cannot share the gospel."¹ Barna went to people in the congregations of pastors who have a biblical worldview and asked basic worldview questions about salvation, Jesus, and heaven and hell. Fewer than one in seven had a biblical worldview even though the pastor believed and taught biblical truth.² In Josh McDowell's book, *The Last Christian Generation*, he

¹ Jim Putman, *Church Is a Team Sport: A Championship Strategy for Doing Ministry Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 74.

² "Only Half of Protestant Pastors Have a Biblical World View," *The Barna Update*, January 12, 2004, accessed February 1, 2017, <http://www.barna.com>.

declares that “85 percent of kids who come from Christian homes do not have a biblical worldview. Most of them are leaving the faith between ages eighteen and twenty-four.”³ Ptuman and Harrington claim, “Fewer than one out of five who claim to be born-again Christians have a worldview of even a few fundamental biblical beliefs.”⁴ Most Christians will die without ever sharing their faith with someone and “sixty to eighty percent of young people will leave the church in their twenties.”⁵ Many will return at a later point in their life or after having experienced a crisis.

While the situation of the Christian population is disheartening enough, the church appears to be in its own struggle of survival. Church goers appear to be breathing as they gather for worship services and run their programs, but oftentimes they are merely surviving rather than living life abundantly.⁶

According to the Barna Research Group, there are about 360,000 churches in America. Current numbers tell that only 15 percent of these churches are growing, and only 2 to 5 percent of the churches are experiencing new conversion growth. Those that are growing are doing so by transfer growth. This means that

barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=156.

³ Josh McDowell, *The Last Christian Generation* (Holiday, FL: Green Key, 2006), 14.

⁴ Jim Putman and Bobby Harrington, *Discipleshift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples, Exponential Series* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 21.

⁵ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011) and David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

⁶ Brad House, *Community: Taking Your Small Group Off Life Support* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 20.

a small percentage of the bigger churches are getting bigger and the smaller churches are shrinking or disappearing altogether.⁷

Putman writes that "50 percent of all evangelical churches in America did not have a single convert last year (according to 2008 data)."⁸ And as many as 80 to 85 percent of American churches are in a season of decline or on the verge of dying completely.⁹

What is further daunting, is that many of these churches in decline are not aware of their struggle and actually believe that they are doing just fine. For many churches in America, their efforts at evangelizing and discipling converts is a chapter reserved in their history that has now closed. Discipleship is not happening in these churches and unless they sound the alarm, their apathy will lead to their demise.

PART 1: DEFINING THE MISSION

It is interesting that most churches have at some point involved themselves in a strong outreach component. Every church at one time had a passion in proclaiming the gospel outside the walls of the church and in growing believers. This most generally occurred during the early stages of the church when it became planted. However, as the church began to grow, these outward-focused churches began to shift toward internal matters such as facilities, programs, and expenses of the ministry.

Over time churches seem to acquire committees, meetings, programs, and traditions, none of which may be wrong in themselves, but which cumulatively move the church from mission to maintenance mode. Time and energy are spent making the institutions function. The energy of many churches is thus

⁷ Putman, *Church Is a Team Sport*, 71.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Aubrey Malphurs, *Strategic Disciple Making: A Practical Tool for Successful Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 23.

absorbed in maintaining the legacy of a program of activities and church buildings.¹⁰

Churches must ask the original questions that were asked from the beginning and that have become lost during the busyness of church life. These questions relate to the church's purpose, mission, vision, and strategy to minister to the community. What does God want us to do? How are we going to minister? These questions are necessary to keep the church from straying into areas that will cause diversion from its most important task—following the mission. The church can do a lot of ministry, but that does not mean it is following its Great Commission mandate.

Re-Envision the Great Commission

The Bible gives the church her mission which is found in Matthew 28:19-20: "... Go and make disciples." The mission is the overall goal of what the ministry should be accomplishing. According to Jesus in this passage, the mission is about being intentional at making disciples and in instructing them to follow Christ. The Great Commission has both an evangelistic and spiritual growth aspect. The bottom line is that the church should be making disciples; it should witness new birth (conversion) and spiritual growth (discipleship) in the people under its ministry. A church that does not reach lost people is not following the mission of the Master. The Great Commission is not just the mission of the early church; it is the mission mandate given to every local church today. The changing times and difficulty of doing ministry in a pagan society are not a valid excuse for failing to make disciples. Putman observes, "Some believers get sidetracked into believing if we just change the laws, America will be godly again. But you cannot mandate morality. Christians could change the world by committing themselves to the mission Jesus gave us."¹¹ The church must realize that God is still in the

¹⁰ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 86.

¹¹ Putman, *Church Is a Team Sport*, 72.

business of redeeming lives and when this does not seem to be happening, the church should do some self-evaluation.

Most churches believe that their mission is the Great Commission and they might even have it well worded on paper, but the reality of the ministry dictates something else other than reaching the lost and growing saints. For example, a church may declare that it a Great Commission church, but upon further examination it becomes evident that the main mission is to have a great music program. This focus is illustrated by the amount of time invested into the music ministry and the emphasis it receives from pastoral leadership.

Another church may have a strong Bible teaching ministry because it values the Scriptures highly. Thus its sole mission, whether held at a conscious or, more likely, an unconscious level, is to communicate the Scriptures. Though this is a worthy endeavor, it is not the church's Great Commission mission.¹²

The Mission and Culture

For many churches that are declining, a significant part of the problem is a struggle to adjust to the changing culture. Malphurs observes "If our churches are going to reach the people of this culture, then they need to understand culture."¹³ Many churches feel that any attempt at understanding culture is a compromise of the Christian faith. It is important to understand culture because most of the issues that turn people away from the gospel have to deal with our particular (cultural) approach rather than the message of the gospel itself. House writes, "We get so entrenched in Christian culture that we don't realize that what feels normal to us may be very intimidating for someone else."¹⁴

¹² Malphurs, *Strategic Disciple Making*, 14.

¹³ Aubrey Malphurs, *The Dynamics of Church Leadership, Ministry Dynamics for a New Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 108.

¹⁴ House, *Community*, 140.

“When the culture, not the message, unnecessarily or unintentionally turns people off to the gospel and Christianity because it is out of touch, then it is bad.”¹⁵ What is ironic is that even those churches that try to avoid adapting to culture have failed to realize that they have already bought into a particular culture. It is not so much an issue of whether culture affects a church but rather which culture is influencing the church.

Culture Has a Mark on Us All

Malphurs emphasizes, “Culture profoundly shapes and influences all of our life and beliefs, and most of us aren’t aware of it. We use culture to order our life, interpret our experiences, and evaluate behavior.”¹⁶ The neighborhood we grew up in, the institution where we graduated, and even the churches where we were raised all have a particular perspective and influence upon our lives. Culture involves ethnic, geographic, racial, social, and religious values and practices that are shared by people of a particular place and time. Culture was an inherent part of the life of Adam and Eve before the fall. Malphurs goes on “We shouldn’t be too surprised the younger generations fail to embrace the cultural aspects of their parents’ and grandparents’ Christianity.”¹⁷ Each person is a product of his own unique culture in which he has lived.

Culture and the Christian Response

Christians have not always agreed on how to engage culture. Some Christians respond by isolation; they have nothing to do with culture. Others run to an opposite extreme and attempt to accommodate themselves to it. A third response and one that is more in line with Scripture is to minister within a particular cultural context. “Isolationists tend to view culture as something

¹⁵ Malphurs, *The Dynamics of Church Leadership*, 137.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

'out there'- an evil force beyond us that we can separate from. However, while culture is 'out there' it's also 'in here.'"¹⁸ The point made previously is that culture is a part of everyone's life; no one really can isolate themselves from culture. Some of these isolationists have mistaken the New Testament word *world* for culture. That usage of the word describes culture when it's under the control of Satan, his forces, or men who pursue evil, not good.¹⁹ There are many aspects of culture that are not inherently evil. We can accept parts of culture that are not in direct opposition to the Bible.

If the Bible does not explicitly or implicitly prohibit a particular behavior, value or experience, and it can be accepted without opposing our consciences, then believers are free to accept it. This simply means they can participate in it without modification and enjoy it to the glory of God. There are some aspects of culture that are naturally opposed to the gospel. Slavery and abortion are obvious examples. Some aspects of culture may be inherently innocuous, but they have been perverted by sin. These things were made good by God but have been used for idolatry or abuse. Sexuality would be a good example.²⁰

Aubrey Malphurs provides an effective criteria for determining whether a church should use a particular practice. He categorizes every practice of the church as either a function, form, or freedom.²¹ Functions are timeless, unchanging, nonnegotiable precepts based upon Scripture. These are mandates and examples include baptism, Lord's Supper, teaching, prayer, etc. Forms are temporal, changing, negotiable practices the church decides based upon culture. These are not mandates and examples include worship style, forms of evangelism (door-to-door etc.) and whether to use wine or grape

¹⁸ Ibid., 131.

¹⁹ Ibid., 130.

²⁰ House, *Community*, 131.

²¹ Malphurs, *Dynamics of Church Leadership*, 98-114.

juice for the Lord's Supper. Freedom are practices with permission to change forms so long as practices do not contradict biblical teaching. Examples include foot washing and women with head coverings.

Given that forms change and that churches have the freedom to change forms that have no instruction from the Bible, churches should also be aware of forms that could become a cultural barrier. House writes,

Barriers of practice are the practical obstacles of time, space, and accessibility that hinder the gospel. Cultural barriers include language and behaviors that alienate people before they can hear the gospel. Barriers of perception are the images, stereotypes, or experiences that people have had with the church that affect their perception of Jesus and the church.²²

These practices may not be wrong biblically speaking, but since they are forms that are considered barriers, it would be wise for the church to change these practices.

Culture and Contextualization

A proper Christian view of dealing discerningly with culture is what missiologists define as contextualization. Every missionary understands that in order to connect to the people of his mission, he must learn the context of his ministry. The missionary learns the customs and culture of the people and ministers within that context instead of imposing his American culture on the indigenous people. He understands that he can adapt his ministry to the culture of the ministry community so long as it does not dishonor Scripture nor dilutes the gospel message. Contextualization views culture as simply a vehicle that "God, man, or Satan can use for their own purposes, whether good or evil."²³ Jesus is our greatest example of contextualization;

²² House, *Community*, 129.

²³ Malphurs, *Dynamics of Church Leadership*, 133.

He took upon Himself the culture of humankind. He was born into a Jewish family and learned the trade of a carpenter.

The Mission and Change

The Great Commission never changes, but we are aware that culture is changing and we must be willing to change as well. Bruce McNichol writes in *Christianity Today* that churches over fifteen years old produce an average of only three converts to Christ per year for every one hundred church members. Churches three years to fifteen years old produce an average of five converts to Christ per year for every one hundred church members. But churches under three years of age produce an average of ten converts to Christ per year for every one hundred church members.²⁴ These statistics tell us that older churches have the greatest struggle with growth. And the reason? Older churches have become established and have a tendency to continue doing what worked for them in the past. Churches have grown passive to change and in some cases may be afraid to deal with it. Every pastor knows that churches hate change. Not just churches, but individuals who make up the church. Humans like the comfort of consistency and they do not like to place themselves under evaluation. If any church is to have a future, it must recognize that it must change and this goes for all churches; the small and large, the traditional and contemporary. Methods must change if we are to be effective at reaching new generations. As Malphurs notes, "To get better at what we do as well as grow spiritually, we must always be improving the way we do things."²⁵ Pastors must lead their churches into times of constant change, and they must go at it slowly and very strategically. There will be those along the way who refuse to change and instead remain content with the status quo. As long as the leadership team is together the church will advance the mission even when

²⁴ Bruce McNichol, quoted in "Churches Die with Dignity," *Christianity Today*, January 14, 1991, 69.

²⁵ Malphurs, *Strategic Disciple Making*, 112.

some members may leave because of change. Leaders understand why change is necessary and decide on what change is essential in the life of the church. Change without a specific purpose that benefits the ministry causes more confusion than growth. House comments,

Effecting change will take commitment, hard work, and patience. Changing the culture of the community in your church will require a consistent plan that starts with repentance on the part of the church and dependence on the Holy Spirit to impart change in our hearts.²⁶

How do church leaders go about reversing the declining condition of the church and establish a church culture where the gospel not only thrives, but people are transformed into mature disciples? Zig Ziglar's famous quote is fitting here: "If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time."²⁷ Mission and vision statements look impressive on paper, but never come to fruition without an effective plan. The church must know its mission, but it needs a well prepared strategy to accomplish the mission.

PART 2: DEVELOPING A DISCIPLESHIP STRATEGY

The main thrust of the Great Commission is the development of mature, multiplying disciples. Salvation is just the beginning of the Christian life, and what Jesus envisioned was not just a crowd, but followers who knew the cost of their devotion. When Jesus invited his disciples to follow him, it was a call to leave a life of comfort and join a cause that was much bigger than themselves. In 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, Paul declares that it is the Holy Spirit who does the transformative work in the life of believers. Human programs and even discipleship strategy is not what changes lives—only God can work in hearts. Yet, we must not diminish the

²⁶ House, *Community*, 192.

²⁷ Quoted from Tom Ziglar, "If You Aim at Nothing...", October 7, 2016, accessed January 30, 2017, <https://www.ziglar.com/articles/if-you-aim-at-nothing-2/>.

fact that church leaders have a shepherding responsibility to which they will be held accountable. Remember, the strategy is how a church will accomplish the mission. Spiritual growth happens only when believers are introduced to growing environments where change can occur.

Discipleship Strategy as a Process

"Babies are not just born into families and then left there. In functioning families, they are nurtured and prepared for adulthood. For all the talk of peer pressure and the influence of the media, the primary influence on a child is the family."²⁸ The stages of our natural life are a vivid illustration of the growth process in the Christian life. When believers experience conversion, they are not automatically perfected from their sinfulness. Although 2 Corinthians 5:17 declares that believers in Christ are a new creation, it does not assume that they will no longer struggle with previous sin or act in immature ways. We expect certain behavior from children and we expect certain behavior from adults. We simply accept that people are at different stages of life and we teach them according to what is most needed during the stage that they are currently in. The problem in the church is that many leaders do not think through issues of maturity when they expect certain things from their members. Furthermore, individuals often move through the life of the church without any formal training to guide the believer in his or her spiritual growth.

Far too often churches that share the gospel with someone, pray with that person, and perhaps even baptize that person, only to give him or her a Bible and tell him or her to come back to church next week. Few people survive past these initial steps, spiritually, and if they do, they often stay in an immature state for their entire lives, never experiencing all that Jesus has for them.²⁹

²⁸ Chester and Timmis, *Total Church*, 113.

²⁹ Putman and Harrington, *Discipleshift*, 91.

Every organization must have some type of structure and plans in place in order to operate and achieve the mission. In the church, this process is often referred to as the assimilation process. The purpose of the assimilation process is to develop a flow of how Christians should be moving in their spiritual life and how they will function in the church during each stage of their growth. A good assimilation process considers where people are in their spiritual life and moves them forward toward maturity. It begins with first-time visitors and continues onward to the highly committed leader. The process should be built to accommodate the whole church; from the children's ministries to adult ministries, everything is contributing to the process of building mature disciples.

The discipleship process is important because it provides reason for the existence of all ministries of the church. This means that ministries that are not an essential part of the discipleship process should normally be discontinued.

Discipleship Strategy as a System not a Program

Computer technology has advanced over the years. There are a variety of computers to choose from on the market today. Besides color options and special user features, computers come with many options that are designed for a particular use. Regardless of whether a computer is considered basic or high-end, computers all have one important thing in common: computers are designed with software systems to run programs.

In the same manner, churches have been notorious for creating a plethora of programs but often fail to install an effective system to manage all of the programs. For the church, discipleship is the system that runs its programs. Malphurs writes,

It is not to be one of several programs of the church, it is the program of the church. It is not a ministry in which a few dedicated disciple makers work with a limited number of people who want to

mature in their faith. It is a ministry of the church that seeks to make disciples of all its people.³⁰

Programs that operate without a clear purpose and direction to grow believers are ineffective. The church is guilty of doing a whole lot of “things,” but few seem to really direct life change. The discipleship strategy is the playbook so to speak for the church. As a playbook, it provides a specific plan that has been created to win the game. Putman uses the playbook analogy: “Many of God’s coaches have no playbook to give the potential players that may come to their teams. They let people do what they want or, just as bad, they let them do nothing, just sit and watch the coach perform.”³¹

The job of the coach is to inform incoming players about the playbook that has been developed by the team of leaders. Some players may come along and believe that they know a better way to play the game, and the coach must be clear that if players want to be on the team; then they must learn to play by the same playbook that all other players have committed to in order to win the game. Putman and Harrington write, “If you’re a church leader and your church has a playbook, then right up front it helps answer a well-meaning person like this who wants the church to go another direction. It helps articulate to that person the specifics of what you do as a church and why you do it.”³² As churches age and become more established in their ways, it becomes more difficult to align some of its beloved programs around a common goal. People see needs and want to do things to meet those needs, but if a church is not careful, it will allow any and every kind of ministry. No one enjoys shutting down a good idea that is designed to benefit someone. But if the church accepts a smorgasbord approach to its ministries, it will inevitably be

³⁰ Malphurs, *Strategic Disciple Making*, 67.

³¹ Putman, *Church Is a Team Sport*, 168.

³² Putman and Harrington, *Discipleshift*, 224.

going in many directions: “Having too many options weakens the impact of the things that are most important.”³³

Discipleship Strategy that is Measurable

Truth be told, churches simply do not like to be evaluated. Often the thinking is that something of a spiritual nature cannot be measured. Because there is nothing really in place to measure a program’s effectiveness, churches simply continue to let programs run their course until they finally die out or there’s no further interest. When pastors are questioned about their discipleship program there is often a detachment between what they believe they are accomplishing and the actual growth numbers from the ministry.

Only 43 percent of the pastors surveyed said their church regularly evaluates discipleship progress among their congregation, but they do believe progress is being made. Over 90 percent of pastors agree their congregation is making significant progress in spiritual development, but less than half are satisfied with the state of discipleship and spiritual formation in their church. This would indicate that pastors are probably looking for improvement but have rarely had anything measureable to determine what or how much progress is truly being made.³⁴

Creating systems that allow ministries to be measured can be beneficial to the ministry. Numbers alone are not the best way to measure the effectiveness of a program. Are disciples being made? In what ways are the program contributing to the overall mission of the church? In what ways are people growing in their relationships with one another? These questions and others demonstrate how systems can be used to measure the effectiveness of a ministry. The last thing a church would want is

³³ Andy Stanley and Bill Willits, *Creating Community: 5 Keys to Building a Small Group Culture* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), 55.

³⁴ Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger, *Transformational Groups: Creating a New Scorecard for Groups* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2014), 71.

for a program that is not working to continue to drain the effort and time of limited volunteers.

Discipleship Assimilation Model

The church's discipling strategy should identify different stages of growth in the Christian life and then seek to provide ministry for each stage. Everything the church does should fit into a particular stage of the discipleship process. Without a clear discipleship strategy, the church will assume that people can find their own way through life, eventually landing at each required stage of growth. Having a visual illustration of the discipleship process helps growing believers to visualize their current place in the process and also provides direction for them as they continue to grow into further stages of their spiritual development. The assimilation model will look different for each ministry context but should include essential functions of any New Testament church such as biblical teaching, genuine relationships, serving, and ministry training. The assimilation model provides a system to accomplish the required functions of the church by using strategic forms to grow disciples. The model that the church develops for its own assimilation process should be simple so that anyone can understand, yet very specific on how the disciple will be progressing in spiritual maturity.

The following is a proposed assimilation model that any church can use because it illustrates how every person can be assimilated into the discipleship process and on the path toward Christian growth.

The Attractional Stage of Discipleship

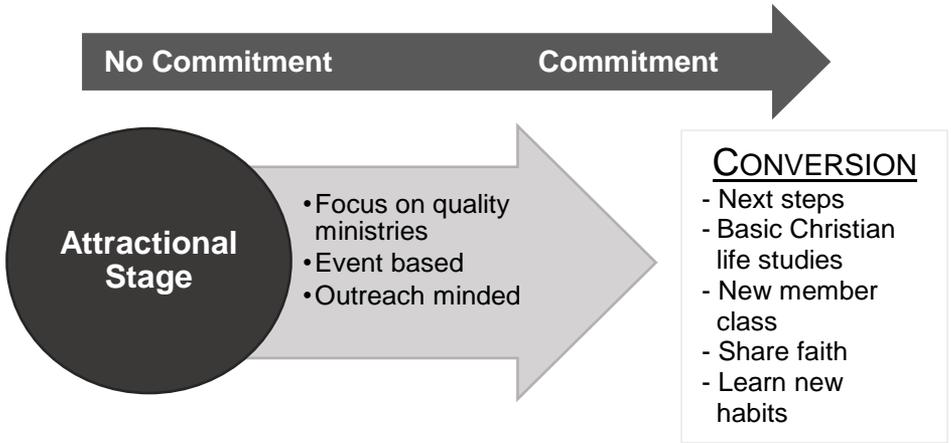


FIG. 1. The Attractional Stage of Discipleship

The attractional phase is usually the entry point into the churches discipleship assimilation strategy. This phase, which involves minimal commitment, is focused on attracting potential disciples. Most visitors fit into this category; they are either unsaved or are Christians who have had little growth in their faith. The most common event that serves to attract curious seekers who have not made a commitment to Christ is the weekend service. Sometimes the concept of being attractional receives criticism from those who believe only Christians are present at a weekend church service. As Putman observes, “In our American culture, the first place a person might come if they are looking for a church is to a service Even non-Christians will attend a service if they are investigating the claims of the Bible.”³⁵ As our American culture becomes increasingly postmodern and fewer people attend church, the body of Christ will need to adapt a missional approach that involves engaging the community outside of event-based services.

³⁵ Putman, *Church Is a Team Sport*, 111.

Intentional Outreach

The intent here is not to argue the merits of whether our services should be geared toward believers or reaching unbelievers, but at the very least we should agree that both believers and unbelievers will be present during our church services every weekend. Since unbelievers will be present, their decision to connect further with the church will be based upon their experience at an event like the weekend service or a special outreach event. Our outreach efforts must take into account the current culture and attempt to create interest by those who have remained distant to Christianity. Putman comments,

For instance, we might say we want to reach the world, but we do things that keep us from being in contact with the world we want to reach. We plan an outreach, but it is really designed to attract people who already think like us (other believers). We don't know how to relate to lost folks, so we pray and expect that God will bring them to us.³⁶

The church must return to the Great Commission and focus on reaching those outside the walls of the church.

Unbelievers are not naturally attracted to the gospel, so what brings them to us is not the truthfulness of our teaching or the spiritual dynamic of the service. Most often, unbelievers are looking for belonging; they are looking for a place of identity and place that gives hope. We admit that those who are in the attractional stage will often have a consumer approach to the church—they are looking for what the church has to offer. Immature Christians and unbelievers base their church experience solely on the quality of the music, the friendliness of the staff, the opportunities for their children, and whether the service and teaching is comprehensible and welcoming. Churches must do all they can (without compromise) to leave an impression on those who visit our services so that they may have future opportunities to speak gospel truth and eventually see them move on to greater maturity. Christians will often overlook

³⁶ Ibid., 109.

the shortcomings of a church; however, unbelievers typically won't be back if their experience does not measure up to their expectation. The church building and services should be "places where neither the church members nor the unchurched would be embarrassed to bring their friends. Remember the church grows by word of mouth. No one will bring people to something that will embarrass them."³⁷

Inadequate Expectations

A primary misconception about those churches who consistently reach unbelievers during the service is that they are compromising the gospel for the sake of outreach. We have already established earlier that churches can have different ministry forms and are free to do so as long as those forms do not conflict with biblical teaching. The most important thing is for the church to follow the prescribed functions of the church set forth in the NT and to choose practices that do not contradict clear biblical instruction. Putman explains, "We do not need to dumb down our preaching to target the unchurched. We can and have to teach biblical truth. However, we must make allowances for the unchurched or they will not desire to hear more."³⁸ Many religious people will be uncomfortable with aspects of the church service and outreach events that are designed to attract. But these people must understand that the attractional phase is not designed to be a stage of significant growth but rather a starting point to move people on to more depth. As with a child that has a lot of growing yet to do, churches cannot expect unbelievers to value the most important things. Some churches offer weekend services specifically designed for the seeker or unsaved person and then offer a service specifically geared for believers. Most churches do not have the luxury of multiple services so the leadership must plan their weekend services strategically in ways that minister to believers but also welcomes those who

³⁷ Ibid., 112.

³⁸ Ibid., 115.

have not yet decided to follow Christ. Many churches begin with an outward drive to reach their community but over time they begin to shift their attention to internal matters, attempting to please those who gather only to neglect those who have not yet become believers.

Inspiration to Continue

Essentially, “the corporate worship service is like a pep rally, in many ways. It informs, motivates, and recruits players to join the team or to get out there and get the job done!”³⁹ It recruits observers to become followers of Christ and followers to become growing leaders of Christ's church. The goal of the attractional stage is to get the individual into the next step because he will not move forward in his spiritual growth just by attending the general session. He needs the accountability of others in his life and the training that cannot be accomplished by just attending a Sunday worship service. Yes, we reach people where they are but that does not mean that we let them remain there. Too many churches have a strategy that ends with attracting more people, and this becomes their main objective in their assimilation strategy. “The challenge is to move people to the next ministry event- to get them out of the stands and onto the discipleship playing field so they attend not only worship service but small group or Sunday school or both as well.”⁴⁰ The discipleship assimilation strategy of the church makes it essential and possible by providing a clear pathway to the next stage of discipleship.

For the person who is not a Christian, the next step is to receive Christ as Savior; for that person the most pressing and immediate need is salvation. During the attractional phase, the unsaved will have many opportunities to hear the gospel and will be encouraged to make Christ their Lord. When people accept Christ as Savior, they should be introduced to the Christian faith

³⁹ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁰ Malphurs, *Strategic Disciple Making*, 93.

through basic classes on doctrine and be encouraged to join a new believer’s small group, a next steps group, or other network to assist during the infant stages of spiritual birth. It is important that new believers be integrated into the discipleship process as soon as possible as time is critical. The longer the new Christian sits without taking the initial steps following salvation, the greater the likelihood of the believer becoming stagnant in the growth process. A new members’ class should be a requirement for anyone who wants to join the church or be involved as a primary teacher and decision maker in the church. The new members’ class will provide an orientation on the church’s beliefs, values, vision, ministry philosophy, and strategy (the playbook). Those who are not yet ready to join the church may participate in certain ministries but should understand that membership is a requirement for certain ministry roles that involve key areas of responsibility and leadership.

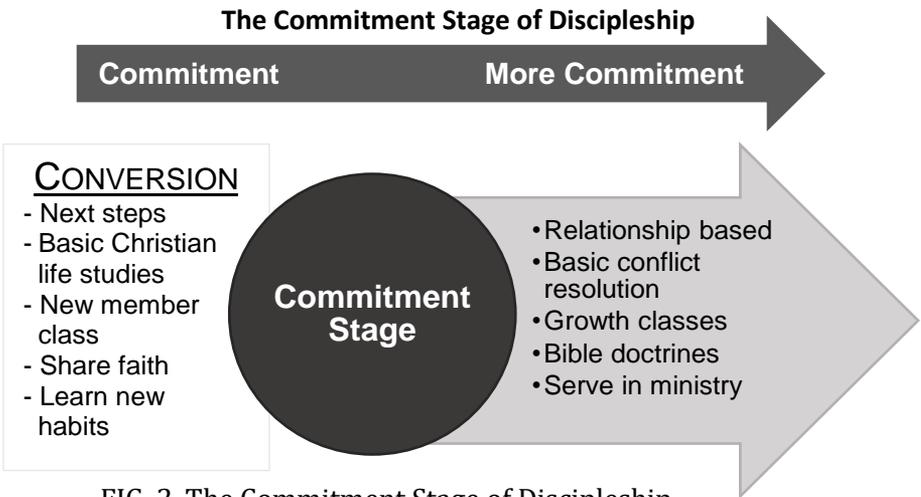


FIG. 2. The Commitment Stage of Discipleship

Conversion marks the beginning of a life of commitment to the gospel. It may be reasonable to include conversion within the commitment stage; however, it seems more fitting to view salvation as the event that makes commitment in the Christian

life possible. It is the catalyst that allows change to take place. In a society that often lacks commitment, it is important for disciples to know that following Christ does not come without a cost. Eternal life is a free gift; however, in Luke 14:25-33, Jesus made it clear to the crowd that following him would demand commitment of all areas of their life. New believers must understand that God has not called them to be idle but to move forward with commitment in the Christian life.

Commitment to Community

A lot of attention has been devoted to small groups in recent years and there is a good explanation for this— our culture craves meaningful relationships. George Gallup has said, “Americans are among the loneliest people in the world.”⁴¹ Andy Stanley and Bill Willits concur: “In the midst of busy lives, overcommitted schedules, and congested cities, we feel alone.”⁴² Americans are too busy to engage in relationships. Busy schedules and the intensity of work has caused many to come home and retreat from relationships. Very few Americans have contact with their neighbors today, unlike past generations. Gone are the days when Americans would sit on their front porch and interact with the life of their community. While most Americans live fast-paced lives, many indicate they wish they had more meaningful relationships. The Starbucks Corporation has learned that the success of its organization is not just from the taste of coffee. As Stanley and Willits observe, “Starbucks sees itself in the business of doing more than selling a premium cup of coffee. Starbucks believes part of its corporate purpose is to create environments that connect people so meaningfully that it changes the quality of their lives.”⁴³ Because of Starbucks’ commitment to community, their products are selling.

⁴¹ George Gallup Jr., *The Peoples Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 1989)

⁴² Stanley and Willits, *Creating Community*, 22.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 20.

The amount of time someone has invested in church attendance is not an indicator of their spiritual maturity. The real indicator is whether the disciple is growing in relationship with other believers and non-believers. Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger write,

In many contexts we've interpreted growth through the lens of a classroom model, based on knowledge and completing a course of study. For transformation, the culture in our churches must shift from mere classroom to community, a community that learns and processes God's Word together and encourages one another to live what they have learned.⁴⁴

Stetzer and Geiger explain, "So many churches are trying to get larger. They put a lot of time, energy, and money into their pursuit of getting bigger. The church needs to make getting small a priority."⁴⁵ Churches are experiencing the effectiveness of small groups simply because smaller group settings provide a solution to the lack of meaningful relationships in our day to day busyness.

In the following pages that develop the concept of community, the terms *community groups*, and *small groups* will be used interchangeably and synonymously. While small groups are not the only ministry in the church, it has become the primary means of effective discipleship in twenty-first century culture because it provides a solution to the growing lack of community in American society.

Biblical Basis for Community

The NT refers to more than thirty "one another's" and if that isn't reason enough to see the Scriptural emphasis on

⁴⁴ Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups*, 81.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

relationships, here are five biblical reasons why our small group ministry is essential:⁴⁶

1. Since the start of the church, Christians have gathered in small and large groups for discipleship, edification, worship, evangelism and ministry (Acts 2:46-47).
2. The Godhead exists in perfect community (trinity) and he created us to live in community with one another (Gen 2:18).
3. Believers need one another when life becomes tough (Eccl 4:9-12).
4. Jesus' presence is stronger when two or three are gathered in his name (Matt 18:20).
5. Fellowship with God's people is part of God's plan for discipleship (Acts 2:41-42).

Even though Jesus preached to large crowds of people, He spent the majority of his time in small group discipleship. He did not just teach; he focused on doing life with his disciples. Putman and Harrington point out, "Paul did not simply lead a Sunday school class once a week or preach a sermon to a large crowd and end there. He focused on doing life with people he discipled."⁴⁷

Benefits of Community Life

Stetzer and Geiger write,

In worship gatherings grounded in Jesus, God supernaturally uses the preaching of his Word and the worship to transform hearts and affections. And in groups grounded in Jesus, God supernaturally uses the community to mature His people. Both are important to God. Both must be important to your church.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Nelson Searcy and Kerrick Thomas, *Activate: An Entirely New Approach to Small Groups* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 156.

⁴⁷ Putman and Harrington, *Discipleshift*, 34.

⁴⁸ Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups*, 65.

People who are involved in a community group of the church generally are more committed to improving their relationships with Christ and with others in the church.

Group environment allows people to express their faith and the experiences of their walk with Christ. Studies indicate that when people contribute, they tend to feel more appreciated and involved rather than just listening to a speaker. And when it comes to sharing their faith with those outside the church building, “Those who are in groups share their faith more and at a higher rate than those not involved in a group.”⁴⁹

As people become connected in small groups, a natural bond forms that leads to people caring for one another. When people walk through life together, they become more involved in each other’s life. Group members take on shepherding roles, thereby taking the load off of full-time care-takers and lowering the unrealistic expectation of pastors having to care for everyone.

Small groups provide another means by which unchurched people may connect with the church. Some people are more comfortable connecting initially in a small group environment instead of an intimidating crowd of people. The community group can be a means to connect new people to the church.

Designing Your Community Groups

Defining the purpose of a small group is the first step in the planning process. Often times the discussion centers around how to get more people involved in community groups rather than emphasizing the purpose and value of community groups. One of the biggest mistakes leaders make when it comes to small group planning is to move forward without sufficient planning. If people do not understand why they should be in a small group, it will be difficult to fill the groups. All small groups should have the following characteristics: Bible centered, intentional focus to help Christians grow in maturity, and providing a safe place where there is honest talk about their walk with Christ.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 123.

Agenda of the Small Group

What actually takes place during the small group meeting? Can small group be a weekly social event where Christians gather to discuss the game and spiritualize it by tacking on a little prayer for the coming week or is there a particular format small groups should follow? Every small group must understand why it exists; if it does not it will attempt to have various purposes but no real central purpose. For example, some people might think the role of small groups is to care for people. A group with this thinking would center all its attention on service without considering how it is growing spiritually. The group could be mistaken to have a primary goal of being missional in which case everything would center on outreach. Putman and Harrington advise, "The key is that the small group's purpose be defined as encouraging discipleship—not primarily fellowship or counseling or even outreach (although these may be vital components of the process)."⁵⁰ When the small group understands its primary function, it will then be able to adequately set its agenda. The group should not attempt to be everything and those that try to will accomplish very little.

Community groups should focus on spiritual growth and "Godtalk" should be a natural part of every gathering. Each group should have a leader and if possible, a coordinator. The leader facilitates the meeting and discussion around a Biblical study or topic. The group study should be something approved by the church leadership and a syllabus should be created to include information about the meeting times, places, and material covered in the group. The coordinator is in charge of taking care of administrative items such as attendance trends, communication, and general care of its members. Church staff should oversee the progress of groups to ensure that they function smoothly and function as coaches to leaders. Group life should be something that exists even when members are apart because the goal are shooting for is an identity, not an event.

⁵⁰ Putman and Harrington, *Discipleshift*, 186.

Expectations of the Small Group

Some groups are expected to reach new people and bring them into the life of the group or church. While no one usually complains about new people having an interest in spiritual matters, the primary focus of the group should not be outreach but the spiritual growth of Christians. People get comfortable with those in their group and when new members join in at random times, it often disrupts the connection already established by those who have bonded. An environment that is constantly changing does not lend itself to authentic community. Leaders must carefully evaluate what they are expecting of their groups. The church must ensure that the church calendar allows for maximum participation in the small group ministry. If small groups are considered an option among many other programs, it will not receive the value it should have in the discipleship strategy. People have limited time in our society and they will only attend a few church functions per week. Pastors often advertise programs as if they all are equally important, but the message that this sends is that nothing is more significant. Nelson Searcy and Kerrick Thomas note,

There is no way you can ask attender Joe Average to be at the weekend service, be at the mid-week service, go to the men's prayer breakfast on Friday morning and be in a small group. It's unrealistic. He only has so much time. When you create a culture that gives your attenders multiple options for how they want to engage in ministry, you do them a disservice.⁵¹

Accountability of the Small Group

Small groups provide the best platform for accountability in the Christian life. Christians all need accountability if they are to grow in their spiritual lives. "The purpose of accountability in community is to lead others to repentance in everyday life through biblical correction with grace, knowing that every sin is

⁵¹ Searcy and Thomas, *Activate*, 41.

unbelief in the gospel.”⁵² We all have certain blind spots in our life that need to be addressed by those who look closely at our lives and tell us what they are seeing. Groups should be a comfortable, non-judgmental environment where people are free to talk about their struggles and learn how to grow spiritually.

Promotion of the Small Group

If we believe that small groups are the most effective means of discipleship growth, then we want to encourage as many as possible to become involved in a small group. The best recruitment tool for small groups is the emphasis that it receives from leadership. Pastors and elders lead in setting the value on what is the most important ministries of the church. Not only should pastors regularly promote the small group ministry from the pulpit, but they also should highlight stories of changed lives because of small group involvement and be willing to join a small group. Ongoing sign-ups for recruitment does not benefit the small group system. A more effective approach is to run a promotional campaign for a certain period of time.⁵³ Constantly putting the small group ministry before people will create a culture that values small group discipleship. No other ministries should be highlighted when focus is to be given to the small group campaign. Make it evident that small groups are important to the life of the church.

⁵² Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups*, 11.

⁵³ Searcy and Thomas explain the importance of running the promotional campaign for recruitment before the start of groups and not having ongoing sign-ups. The value of promotional months with designated periods for sign-up is that it raises group participation by having everyone begin together, decreases burnout of members and leaders, and puts regular focus and creativity on something that is important in the life of the church (*Activate*, 35-37).

Life Span of the Small Group

Once groups are regularly meeting, how long should small groups last? Running small groups indefinitely is an unwise practice for two reasons. First, in American culture people will not sign up for something that has no end in sight. Whether it is a college course, workshop, or seminar, everything comes to a completion. Small groups without a defined ending point will become less appealing because people do not want their schedules to be forever restricted. Some people fear that if they have an unpleasant experience with their small group, they are trapped without an exit plan. Second, those who newly join a small group do not want to join a group that is already well established. It makes sense for prospective small group participants to join new groups that are just starting off. Most churches will not have the manpower to regularly add new groups. The practice of running small group programs for a set duration allows for a reset period in which all groups can restart and add new members. This also allows an exit plan for those who wish to try a different small group or break off to form additional small groups.

Some churches have made it a practice to split a small group once it reaches a certain maximum number of participants; however, no one wants to divide something that they have grown comfortable with. A better approach to reproducing small groups would be to begin every small group with a potential leader in training that could then lead a group during the next rotation. The coordinator of a particular small group could be a good candidate to begin an apprenticeship under the group leader and eventually break off to lead his own small group the next time.

Putman and Harrington write, "Once a Christian has become relationally connected with other disciples and is learning how to obey Christ, he or she will begin to experience spiritual growth. This will lead to a growing interest in serving others, using the gifts, skills, wisdom, and abilities that God has given to bless others."⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Putman and Harrington, *Discipleshift*, 160.

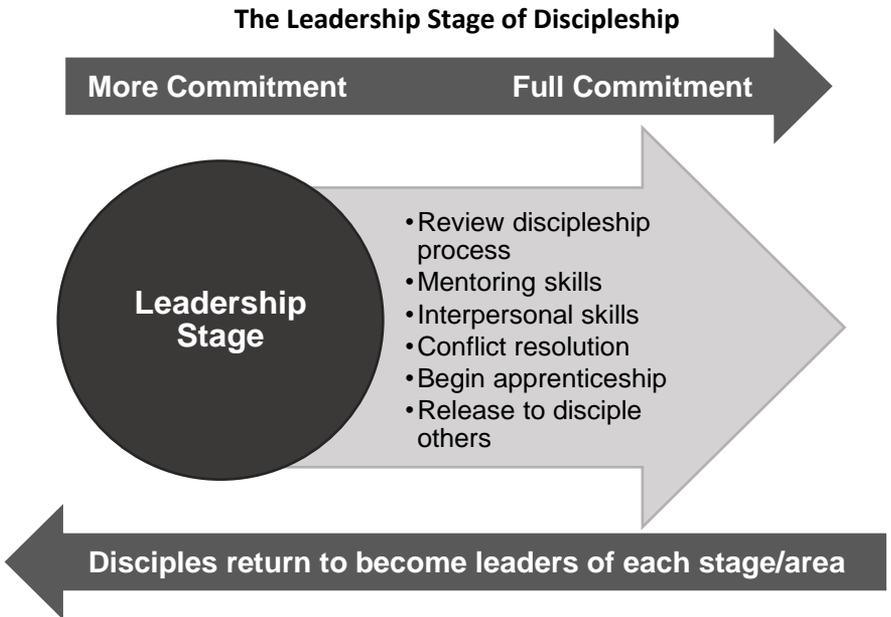


FIG. 3. The Leadership Stage of Discipleship

The final stage of the discipleship model is the leadership stage. Most people would look at this final stage and think that they could never become leaders. Part of the reason why normal disciples cannot imagine themselves as future leaders is because they have misunderstood leadership to be people who are good preachers, teachers, administrators, or professionals. When normal Christians see leadership as vocational, they begin to feel that they have little to offer.

When people think of Bible studies, they often think of a teacher teaching and everyone else passively listening. This is a problem for several reasons. First, many people do not have the gift of teaching, and a person who cannot teach can make a group really boring. Second, it is difficult to recruit leaders because many will feel that they are unqualified, that they do not have the theological training or biblical knowledge to lead.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Putman and Harrington, *Discipleshift*, 191.

Pastors and church leaders must help disciples come to realize that God wants them to be leaders and this does not mean that they will become pastors, teachers, or evangelists. “Not all of us are eloquent or engaging. Not everyone can think on their feet. Some people are simply not good at speaking to strangers and forming new friendships Most gospel ministry involves ordinary people doing ordinary things with gospel intentionality.”⁵⁶ Second Timothy 2:2 should be the church’s model for leadership training. Paul had disciplined Timothy, and now he tells Timothy to go and disciple other men. But it doesn’t stop there—the point of Timothy’s discipling others is that the disciplined can become disciplers. If we view the Great Commission as a mandate that involves producing disciples, then it would naturally lead to the training of others to become leaders. How many pastors can look out into their congregation and see a group of capable Christians whom they can entrust the ministry of disciple making? Often times the church is dysfunctional because it has not given direction to training its leadership. Pastors and elders must view their role as a coach, helping others succeed in the ministry. They must train leaders at every level in order to succeed. Teams are looking to coaches to help them toward victory. The discipleship assimilation model is the plan to prepare disciples to become future leaders of the church. Every stage of the model has been instrumental to bring the disciple into greater commitment where he will be mature and able to lead others into maturity.

Some pastors and disciples have unfortunately viewed leadership roles as something to be reserved for a select few. Churches have generally hired from outside the church believing that no internal candidates exist. In the NT, church leaders were often appointed from within the congregation. The issue that churches face today is not a lack of qualified individuals who could become future leaders, but rather the absence of a training process that could equip the disciples God has already given the church to become leaders. Training is an important aspect of everyday life, yet the church has not developed a reputation of

⁵⁶ Chester and Timmis, *Total Church*, 62-63.

effective leadership training. Equipping the saints involves training and too many disciples are short-circuited when they are introduced to leadership without proper guidance.

Leaders are Developed

The ministries of the church are only as effective as the training system of those ministries. Leaders must be developed; they need initial training, ongoing training, and direction as they lead their particular ministries. Churches do a disservice to people when they place them in leadership without equipping them for the roles in which they will serve. Leadership development is more than training of a particular skill like teaching; it involves some of the other important skills such as handling conflict and relating to different personality traits within the ministry. Classes should focus on interpersonal skills, understanding the biblical instruction for conflict resolution, mentoring skills, and how to be an effective leader. Michael Gerber, the author of one of the most popular business books, tells a story about a woman who was incredible at making apple pies so she opened her own business: "But the business was failing, and she was on the verge of collapse. What she really loved to do was make apple pies, and people loved them. But she had no managerial or entrepreneurial skills so her business was doomed to fail."⁵⁷

Those who desire to be leaders must demonstrate a teachable spirit. There is no place in the ministry for experts who think they know it all. Humility is a major character trait required of all leaders. Furthermore, the individual must clearly understand the core values, mission, and vision of the church and accept responsibility to serve under the church's established strategy for disciple making. They come ready to advance the kingdom of God under the direction of pastors and elders, the spiritual advisors of the ministry.

⁵⁷ Cited in Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups*, 133.

Jesus did not look for leaders who came to the job already skilled for the work. He developed leaders who were normal ordinary men (the disciples) who needed a little shaping.

Audrey Malphurs advises, "Your church does not exist to provide jobs for people, but to provide Christ-honoring ministry through people with the right divine wiring in the right positions."⁵⁸

Leaders Need Apprenticeships

One part of effective training that many programs lack is an apprenticeship process. Classroom training is needed but often times it proves inadequate to prepare someone for a new task. Stanley and Willits note,

The assumption is that the more information leaders are exposed to, the better prepared they will be to lead. But, like the conference notebook gathering dust on the shelf, it is not the acquisition of information that properly prepares a leader to lead; rather, it is the application of the right information.⁵⁹

Furthermore, House writes,

Think of it like playing golf. I can study all the techniques and tricks that can be crammed into a magazine, and I can tell someone everything I've learned. But it doesn't make me a better golfer if I never swing a club.⁶⁰

Apprenticeships allow instructors to not only teach information but to observe the student in action allowing for on-the-job training. Once the student is comfortable performing the task on his own the instructor can then release the student for ministry leadership.

⁵⁸ Malphurs, *Strategic Disciple Making*, 120.

⁵⁹ Stanley and Willits, *Creating Community*, 153.

⁶⁰ House, *Community*, 55.

It is appropriate to specify the duration of the ministry responsibility that pastors expect from their leaders. New leaders can always renew their commitment if they desire to continue, but they should never be expected to serve indefinitely as this leads to ministry burnout and poor stewardship.

Leaders Reproduce Themselves

Second Timothy 2:2 becomes the standard for measuring the effectiveness of a discipleship strategy. Paul tells Timothy to make disciples who will reproduce themselves. The best indication that someone is a mature disciple of Christ is that he makes it his life's mission to equip others to be trainers. We train others for ministry not so that we may fulfill vacancies in our ministry, but because there is a biblical mandate to be trainers. The Christian life is about passing on the faith to faithful men. There really are only two choices when it comes to the way we do ministry: we could become ministry hoarders and not allow others the opportunity to lead or we can entrust the ministry to those who have demonstrated commitment to the gospel message and are willing to take on responsibility. Scott Thomas and Tom Wood clarify, "Faithful leaders will make disciples, but great leaders focus on making other leaders."⁶¹

CONCLUSION

The church needs a new paradigm for making disciples in the twenty-first century. Pastors should view themselves more as system developers or as coaches instead of acting as care providers. So many church leaders have set their sights on the peripheral matters such as attendance numbers and program numbers instead of pursuing the more important matters such as real growth in discipleship. Being large is not an indicator of success but whether people are coming to Christ and being shaped into Christ's image. Ministry goals should focus on the quality of membership rather than the quantity of members. The

⁶¹ Scott Thomas and Tom Wood, *Gospel Coach: Shepherding Leaders to Glorify God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 28.

beautiful thing is that as a church focuses on the quality of their discipleship strategy, the church will naturally grow because more people are committing to the ministry. Things that are living naturally grow. Members will learn how to better love God, one another, and their neighbors. The unsaved will encounter a supernatural experience when they witness transformation taking place in community life.

Christ is at the head of the organization because the Father has given him all the authority to direct the affairs of his church. The elders or pastors work in the churches not only as leaders but capable, gifted administrators, conducting the affairs of the church. The people are the workers whom Christ has gifted. They, in turn, use their gifts to equip other workers to carry out the ministry of the church.⁶²

Stanley and Willits ask, "People will never come to experience the benefits of your ministry unless they can easily connect to it. Have you created a maze or steps to connection? If you have provided steps, are they easy, obvious, and strategic?"⁶³ People who attend churches are either consumers or they are owners in the ministry. We want to move people toward greater commitment.

The challenges that the church encounters today are unique, unlike those at any other time in history. Churches all across America are experiencing a decline in attendance and ministry passion, and many churches are dwindling to the point of closure. Churches must come to awareness regarding the changes in culture and rethink their strategy for effective disciple making. The church must experience a renewed interest in the Great Commission and develop a process that assimilates every person into the life of the church. They should understand that disciples move through stages of maturity in the Christian life as they learn to develop into mature leaders of the church.

As Stetzer and Geiger comment, "The health, long-term mission, and viability of the church are not going to be

⁶² Malphurs, *The Dynamics of Church Leadership*, 88.

⁶³ Stanley and Willits, *Creating Community*, 175.

determined by those who gather on Sunday morning. The future of the church will be determined by the depth of its disciples.”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups*, 18.