

Solid Church Growth through Disciple Making

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Through the past 35 years I have served with many dear pastors, in staff or volunteer leadership roles responsible for discipleship. I have produced training products used in thousands of churches and continue to participate in forums and discussions with pastors at small, medium, large and “mega” churches. I have found 99.9% of pastors (senior, adult, youth, and children’s pastors) to be godly, hardworking, focused men and women who are sacrificing to be involved in ministry. Yet, in spite of their sacrifice, church attendance continues to decline while biblical ignorance and immorality rises among Christians. So many church leaders are running on a treadmill, drawing a crowd, without stopping to evaluate what they need to do to be more effective in making disciples.

It’s time that senior pastors step up to become Ministers of Discipleship and for youth pastors to model after other youth pastors who have been successful in developing youth who are disciples, instead of using trial and error.

The Great Commission

In His last words to His disciples, Jesus said: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (NIV, Matthew 28:19-20)

“Go”

Be open to allowing the Lord to take you to people and places that you are not totally comfortable with, so you can win people to Christ.

“Make disciples”

Answer this, “Is a disciple someone who takes one step toward Christ (prays the sinner’s prayer) or is a disciple someone who follows Christ?”

We need to have in place a plan to help someone who prays the sinner’s prayer become an actual life-long follower of Christ, or we are failing to make disciples. This means we must train the believers in our congregation how to lead people to Christ AND we must have an intentional first steps ministry to help those who pray a sinner’s prayer become a life-long follower of Christ.

“Baptizing them”

So then, “Is a disciple one willing to acknowledge before men that he is a disciple?” That’s just what takes place in baptism...public acknowledge of a disciple’s death, burial and resurrection in Christ!

“Teaching them”

Now...two more questions, “Is it possible for you to teach them all the Bible says about everything they may face, through your sermons and classes?” “What is the best way to help the believers in your congregation to be transformed daily into the image of Christ?”

No, you can't teach them everything. You can only teach them "bits" of what they need. The best way to help them be daily transformed is to teach them to be "self-feeders." They have to learn to teach themselves from God's Word. This means that solid Bible-based carefully prepared sermons need to be viewed as "salt" to make them thirsty for more and that believers must be taught to teach themselves from God's Word, daily, by following sound principles of Bible interpretation. Believers must be moved from being spectators to participants. They must learn to stand on their own, in the power of the Word and Spirit!

Draw, Keep and Grow

In order for a church to experience healthy disciple-making growth, it must be able to draw, keep and grow.

Non-believers and unchurched believers are drawn to a church through relationships with those who already attend, location, online publicity of church ministries addressing their specific needs, the community reputation of the church, or special events. In general, it is the Holy Spirit who draws those who are hungry, though He is more likely to draw people to healthy churches positioning themselves to provide a Christ-centered, warm, nurturing, challenging, and intentional disciple-making environment.

Believers stay in a church where they develop friends, are encouraged, sense God's presence, see answered prayer, experience personal growth, feel like they are part of something bigger than themselves and where they find ministries through which all their family members can grow. Oh yes, the leaders must model what they teach. Leaders must be godly, moral, honest men and women who strive to walk in humility before God and those who plan and prepare excellent biblically sound ministries under the leading of the Holy Spirit. Over time, people will get tired of trying to serve with disorganized, disrespectful, micro managing leaders or situations where an "insider mentality" (see explanation below) rules the decision-making process and many will leave or resign to become pew sitters.

Believers grow in a church where solid Biblically-based well-prepared sermons are presented each week, but they will explode in growth when they participate in small group Bible studies and are taught to feed themselves from God's Word, applying solid principles of Biblical interpretation (see link below). Through the years I have used many wonderful topical study curriculums in Bible studies, but, by far, the most high-impact studies have generally been verse-by-verse, using the Bible itself as the curriculum. I find that churches need to offer both topical and verse-by-verse studies, as well as support type groups to help those in crises (divorce, grief, marriage, etc.).

Very important: We need an intentional first steps ministry for new believers that includes, a small group learning situation with a special "First Steps" curriculum, mentors and other small groups they can be graduated to for further growth.

Last, believers stay and grow in a church when they serve together with others in the church. They also grow and become agents of growth and change when they learn to share their faith and minister outside the church. Remember, pastors, just because you don't see your people serving in ministries that you see, inside the church, doesn't mean they aren't serving. Generally, "Go" is outside the church, in their community, family, or job!

Turning the Tide by Changing the Focus

Let me ask a few more questions to get you thinking. First, “Why has biblical ignorance, powerless living and immorality increased among believers when we have more Bible curriculums available than ever before?” “Why do surveys reveal that only 65% of Christians read their Bible, regularly? Why do literature departments of secular universities, Christian Universities and Seminaries report that so many incoming youth have very little Bible knowledge, even when they have been raised in church? Why are Christian universities including remedial Bible courses that cover what youth previously had learned in Sunday school, instead of the more advanced Bible courses that they had been able to offer, to incoming youth, in the past? Perhaps it’s time to rethink what is being done.

Where do we go to find out about God’s plan of salvation, loving God, victorious Christian living, prayer, the person and work of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, church history, theology, etc.? The Bible, of course!

I would like to suggest that we need to constantly and intentionally keep the focus on the transformation that takes place in a person’s life when he develops a regular practice of studying God’s Word on his own, following sound principles, and participates in regular small group Bible study. To change the tide, this means...

...that all pastors/youth pastors must intentionally talk about it from the pulpit, teach Bible and encourage all to commit to study/be part of a Bible study. This should clearly be portrayed as more important than special events.

...It means that the Bible, self-study, participation in a Bible study, and sound principles must be the focus on the website and around the building and that curriculums evaluated as “shallow” should be avoided.

...It means that new believers must be provided a Bible and shown how to download a Bible app on their phones.

...It means that all believers should be encouraged to invest in a study Bible and that study Bible may need to be offered for sale.

...Testimonies need to include the result of regular study in specific believer’s lives.

One Last Thing

Oh yes, and one last thing: Get input from “outsiders” (fairly new to the church) instead of “insiders” (pastoral team, long-time members, or raised in the church youth) to see what new people (those who have been there 8-12 months) are getting from what you are doing. Ask them whether they were made to feel welcome, are involved in a small group, or see their family members growing. Ask them to try and find things on your website, to see if it is outsider-friendly, or what the website communicates as being most important. Ask for them to be brutally frank, so you can identify areas that need to be “tweaked.” Open yourself up to the world of the newer lay-person. You will be surprised at what you learn and find out! It can save you years of ineffectiveness.