

# **Crucial to Consider It's Time to Take a Hard Look at the Church**

By Marcia Gillis

My husband and I have been intensively involved in teaching, directing discipleship ministries and producing curriculum for discipleship ministries, over the past 30 years. We have worked with many denominations and churches. He has taught thousands of pastors and church leaders to utilize Bible study software to develop better sermons and lessons.

Below, are my observations and opinions, in regard to the reasons for the current state of our churches, and individual Christians. I believe it's time to take a hard look.

## **The Future of Christianity**

The impact of Christianity in America and Europe, and church attendance, has declined over the past 30 years, even though we have more mega churches church growth books, and Christian books/websites/blogs, and thousands of examples of powerful worship/celebration gatherings than ever before.

Even with the instant availability of Christian books and information, both written and digital, sound biblical knowledge seems to be declining.

According to Barna Research, there is less commitment, spiritual depth, repentance and a greater misunderstanding of basic Christian doctrines among those who call themselves Christians than ever before. (See the articles listed under "Faith and Spirituality" on barna.org.).

## **Logical Reasons for the State of the church**

1. Overall, churches appear to emphasize the large group worship celebration and preaching experience over the small group discipleship ministry, instead of emphasizing both. (Remember, both Jesus' and the Apostles' examples of discipleship utilized small groups.)
2. Church leaders have been inconsistent in training and mobilizing the laity to accomplish the work of the discipleship ministry, because it takes a lot of work. (Large group ministry takes less staff, though it is also less effective in changing lives, and relies on a lecture approach to teaching.)
3. Because they rely on large teaching groups, Church leaders generally look for a prospective teacher with "star quality", and overlook godly talented people who can lead a small group, very effectively. This creates an unbiblical expectation that only "stars" can be effective.
4. Lack of mobilization allows godly talented passionate laity to sit as "spectators" in the pew, when they could be involved in leading small Bible studies, teaching, and mentoring.
5. The existing Sunday schools, home groups and other small groups are often unsupervised and left to run on their own, without trained leaders, guidance, or adequate curriculum.
6. There has been/is an over-emphasis on the use of "topical studies" and a neglect of teaching people to do verse-by-verse Bible study, themselves and in small groups, following sound principles of biblical interpretation.
7. There has been a "dumbing down" of curriculum, by publishers. Small groups are often provided with watered down workbooks and a video component to discuss, neither of which may lead them in learning how to adequately study God's Word themselves. (I sincerely

appreciate the exceptions to this trend provided by ministries like Precept.org. Beth Moore, and others.)

## **Recommended Change the Way Things Are**

*He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the quipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Sion of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of Each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.*

(Ephesians 4:11-16, NASB 95)

1. Plan to incorporate small discipleship groups for every age-group and gender ministry: children, youth, young adults and older adults.
2. Think through what these lay leaders need to know: How to Study the Bible, Fundamentals of Our Faith, and How to disciple a Specific Age Group.
3. Begin to regularly offer groups which teach leaders what they need to know to be effective leaders.  
(“Regularly” is a key word here. “Today’s” leader may move /resign and need to be replaced “tomorrow” by a new leader. Leadership development is a constant process.)
4. Recruit your first group of prospective group leaders, and invite them to participate in the training groups.
5. Make the “How to Study the Bible” aspect of your training an opportunity for them to actually study a short book of the Bible, verse-by-verse. **(As YOU lead this study, review the principles of sound biblical interpretation, and model those principles yourself. Encourage them to underline, circle and write down definitions for key words in the margins of their Bible. Encourage them to participate in discussion.)**
6. Train leaders how to work with specific ages, review basic information handouts with them (age group characteristics, discipline, etc.) and be sure to have them spend a few weeks working with a master teacher. They will learn best by modeling. If you don’t have a master teacher for a specific age at your church, send them to observe a master teacher at another church. (Believe me, this is, by far, the most effective way to train.)
7. Spend extra time with youth and adult small group leader prospects, guiding them through verse-by-verse studies. Recommend specific online commentaries to them, and online lexicon tools that can help them in understand difficult passages. You will also need to help them know how to handle controversial topics. In some cases, there may be strong support for various perspectives. Show respect for those positions. Take care how you guide your leaders, and they will take care how they guide others.
8. Release those leaders whom you feel are ready to serve as small group leaders, after making sure they have adequate resources to be effective (study resources, group location, meeting time, and publicity).
9. Plan to meet, communicate, and problem-solve with your leaders regularly.
10. Continue to lead verse-by-verse groups, yourself, but draw future leaders, not only from your own group but from the groups being led by your leaders

11. Be sure to always include verse-by-verse group options with the topical offerings, and encourage topical group participants to participate in verse-by-verse groups, regularly.
12. Do this and you will incorporate the principle of multiplication. You will set into motion a constant process by which people are mentored, disciplined AND developed as prospective leaders who will be effective both inside and outside the church!