



Making Disciples that Renew the Church

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There is a lot of talk these days about the need to become 'disciple-making churches'. The gist is that we must 'do church differently' in order to renew discipleship and mission. But is it a mistake to keep thinking about doing church before making disciples? What if we turn this around, and imagine that starting with a vision for discipleship might lead to doing church differently? Here are a few brief thoughts based on the Inspire Way of Life (WoL):

Make Disciples and We Will Become Vital Congregations (WoL: Seeking Growth)

We have been duped us into believing that changing the way we organise the church will revitalise our congregations. In British Methodism, for example, a Connexion-wide mantra of 'restructuring for mission' has driven a range of organisational changes across districts, circuits, and local churches. Viewed positively, the motivation for restructuring lies in a tension between the fear of diminishing resources and a hope for increasing mission activity. So, we review our resources and personnel to develop strategies for improving efficiency and releasing creativity. We then develop mission statements, priorities, and core values to guide 'new ways of working', and provide standardised training to roll it out. New structures also means new leadership, teams and committees to manage the new future.

Unfortunately, when we start with church structures, they typically become an end in themselves. Renewal gets confused with implementing some new vision of 'doing church', and discipleship is reduced to serving the structures themselves, all in the name of mission. If we start with discipleship, however, we are driven by a different question: What kind of people do we want to be? Answer: People who delight in the gospel of God's holy love, and seek the fullness of a Jesus-shaped and Spirit-filled life. People who desire to glorify God with their whole selves, and see his kingdom come in our daily routines.

Changing our structures without changing our lives will not lead to vital congregations. But those who long for more of God also long for structures that can help them become more faithful disciples. Adapt to meet that need, and we will become a vital people through whom the church will be renewed.

Make Disciples and We Will Have Authentic Worship (WoL Using Disciplines)

In most congregations, the Sunday service pretty much defines what it means to 'do church'. Discipleship means attendance at worship, and mission is about attracting new church-goers to improve our attendance records. So, we strive to make our services more lively, creative and transforming. And we spend a lot of time arguing about musical style, how messy we can be, and whether people are satisfied. Behind all this, there is an unspoken assumption that God is more real, present and active on a Sunday morning than the 24-7 flow of everyday life. We come to church in order to 'recharge our batteries' for the God-forsaken week that lies ahead. We arrive 'flat', or half dead, hoping for a jump-start back to life! And worship leaders try to oblige, desperately striving to inject some enduring enthusiasm, while getting worn out and disillusioned in the process.

Unfortunately, when we start with church services we are likely to end up as consumers rather than disciples. We binge on one good meal on a Sunday, then starve for the rest of the week. If we start with discipleship, however, we ask a different question: What kind of worshippers do we want to be? Answer: People who find God to be just as real, present and active on Wednesday afternoon as Sunday morning. People who pray always and give thanks in all circumstances because they practise the presence of God, every day of the week.

Changing our services without changing our lives will not lead to authentic worship. For those who stay connected to grace, worship services are not the start of a God-less week, but the culmination of a God-filled week. Adapt to this, and our Sunday worship provides an opportunity to celebrate the reality of God's presence and goodness through the ups and downs of daily life.

Make Disciples and We Will Experience Real Fellowship (WoL Sharing Fellowship)

Christian fellowship is sustained in worshipping congregations, great and small. But we have also discovered the benefit of small groups, which help us make deeper friendships and grow in love for one another. Indeed, these groups can be where we 'do church' most meaningfully, especially when church politics and Sunday services leave us dry and weary. One life-giving feature of small groups is that they are organised around hearing, reading and studying the scriptures, and receive the transforming power of God's word into our lives. For a growing number of people, however, the 'elephant in the room' is a suspicion that all this fellowship still leaves us hearers rather than doers of the word, making little impact on everyday life. So, we try to increase the spiritual depth of our meetings by making them more creative, interactive and experiential. As a result, we may find ourselves better informed, and even convicted... but still not really changed.

Unfortunately, it seems as though we are caught on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, if we start with the need for friendship, we may end up with social circles rather than spiritual communities. On the other hand, by starting with the need to study we may become mere learners rather than real followers of Jesus. If we start with discipleship, however, we ask a different question: What kind of friends do we want to be? Answer: People who hold each other accountable for their daily walk with God. People who help each other discern God's presence and follow God's lead in the flow of everyday life.

Changing our groups without changing our lives will not lead to real fellowship. But those who invest in deep spiritual conversation will be most stretched in both their love and service, as hearers and doers of the word. Adapt to this, and we will love one another, as well as live the gospel more faithfully.

Make Disciples and We Will Develop Effective Mission (WoL Engaging Mission)

Delegate a mission committee. Do church differently. Develop an outreach strategy. Design a programme. Drum up volunteers! We have followed this familiar strategy, and many non-Christian people have been blessed, but so few (if any) have become followers of Jesus. And little by little, we have become disillusioned or burned out, longing for just one prodigal to return. Yet it is an open secret that people are evangelised by building relationships, not running programmes. Wesley said that the great stumbling block to the spread of the gospel is the lives of Christians! In other words, people who are not alive to God, and have no life to share with others. The fact is, all our mission activities will be ineffective if we are not filled with the life of God, and overflowing with love of neighbour.

Unfortunately, when we start with mission strategy we usually end up running programmes rather than sharing faith. If we start with discipleship, however, we ask a different question: What kind of witnesses do we want to be? Answer: People who are alive to God and share God's heart for others. People who seize everyday opportunities to love others in word and deed, one act of mercy at a time.

Changing our strategies without changing our lives will not lead to effective mission. But those who are seeking to abide deeply in God and live missionally in the world will see programmes as opportunities for building relationships. Adapt to this, and we will share the kind of faith that makes disciples and renews the church.