

## Healthy Missional Marker: A life-transforming walk with Jesus

### Introduction/explanation:

Our Covenant Affirmation on The Necessity of New Birth states it so well: "It is through transformed people that God transforms the world." A walk with Jesus begins with entering relationship with Jesus and continues as a learning journey throughout our lives. It is meant to result in a better world. We humans were created to be in relationship with God who sent Jesus to reconcile us to himself. Our walk with Jesus is a relationship that transforms us from the inside out. How do you articulate for your congregation what it means to have a life-transforming walk with Jesus?

Discipleship to Jesus is central and essential. Being a disciple means being a learner. It's like a being an apprentice of Jesus – learning throughout our lives to be more like him. The church is a learning community and a community of learners. An intentional focus on our formation and spiritual growth is essential to our overall health as a church. And yet Dallas Willard made this challenging observation of the church: "It is now a commonly held belief that one can be a Christian without being a disciple of Jesus." Is this a commonly held belief in your congregation? What does the church need to do to support this learning journey?

### Statistics

As you think about the why and how of this learning journey with Jesus, consider these findings:

- ❖ From **George Barna**, *Growing True Disciples* ([barna.org](http://barna.org)):
  - 80% of believers surveyed indicated that having a deep personal commitment to the Christian faith is a top priority
  - When asked what is the most important thing they hope to accomplish in life, only 20% mentioned anything directly related to spiritual growth
  - 95% of adults acknowledge that their church encourages spiritual growth
  - 50% believe that discipleship is in the top 3 priorities of their church.
  - 9 out of 10 adults surveyed indicated that if their church helped them to identify specific spiritual-growth goals to pursue, they would at least listen to the advice and follow parts, if not all, of it
  
- ❖ "Americans are by all measures a deeply religious people, but they are also deeply ignorant about religion. Researchers from the independent Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life phoned more than 3,400 Americans and asked them 32 questions about *the Bible*, Christianity and other world religions, famous religious figures and the constitutional principles governing religion in public life. On average, people who took the *survey* answered half the questions incorrectly, and many flubbed even questions about their own faith." [The New York Times, September 28, 2010, article written by Laurie Goodstein]
  
- ❖ **The Reveal Study** ([revealnow.com](http://revealnow.com)), a survey of congregants at Willow Creek and 6 other churches, concludes:

- "a quarter of the 'close to Christ' and 'Christ-centered' crowd described themselves as spiritually 'stalled' or 'dissatisfied' with the role of the church in their spiritual growth. Even more alarming to Willow Creek: About a quarter of the 'stalled' segment and **63 percent of the 'dissatisfied' segment contemplated leaving the church.** And as Willow Creek expanded its research into churches of varying geographic locations, sizes, and ethnic and denominational backgrounds, the church said the same general pattern emerged, an indication that the problem extends beyond Willow Creek.

### **A few key scripture passages with a few discussion questions each**

Jesus taught his disciples what it means to follow him. These teachings are meant for us today, too. He made it clear that being a disciple means being an apprentice – learning to do and be what Jesus demonstrated through his own life. And that takes practice. (See Luke 6:40) It's not about *trying*. It's about *training*.

We have to think about it and have a plan for it. We need to arrange our days and weeks intentionally toward that end. Creating a sustainable plan is important. Some call this a Rule or Rhythm of Life. It's made up of spiritual practices or disciplines. But it begins with selecting particular practices that we can commit to day in and day out.

*I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit' apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5, NIV)*

- What practices (spiritual disciplines) have been helpful in sustaining and growing your relationship with Jesus.
- As church leaders, how do you encourage and equip people in the spiritual disciplines.

Always a *relationship*. Never a *formula*.

The really good news as we walk with Jesus is that our transformation is not something we accomplish on our own. It's the work of the Holy Spirit. And that work is made visible in our character and in our actions— both as individuals and as a community.

*But **the fruit of the Spirit** is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things **there** is no law. (Galatians 5:22,23)*

- Is there fresh evidence of the Spirit's work in your own life and that of your faith community?
- What experiences do you imagine are needed in order to see this fruit produced?
- What kind of leaders are needed to provide such experiences?

*So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the*

*whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:11-16 NIV)*

- According to this passage, what is the purpose of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers and what is the intended result?
- What does the equipping of people look like in your church?
- Compare the image of being “tossed back and forth...blown here and there” with your understanding of “speaking the truth in love.” When did you last experience either one of these images yourself? What was it like?

**Christ point: How do we see this marker expressed in Jesus’ life and ministry?**

Being attentive to Jesus as we walk with him and being open to the Spirit are both central to this marker. We walk with Jesus by being aware of his continual presence with us. Jesus exemplified this continual awareness and attentiveness to his Father. According to his own words (John 5:19, Jesus’ every act was guided by God, his Father. And we can know the Father just as Jesus him.

In addition to an attentiveness and openness to God, Jesus practiced disciplines such as prayer, fasting, learning the words of Scripture, experiencing periods of silence and solitude, living a life of simplicity, giving generously to others, and joining the community in worship. And others around him recognized both physical and his spiritual growth. “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.” (Luke 2:52) What’s more, he continuously invited others into a life-transforming walk with him, teaching and healing, listening and entering the pain of others.

**The key question:** In what ways are we forming disciples of such depth and radical obedience that they --- that we --- are able to engage the current cultures and address the profound brokenness around and within us?

In what ways am I becoming more like Jesus, being his hands and feet in the world?

**Prayer**

Form these words of Scripture into a prayer for your church: (Ephesians 3:14-21)

*For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge —that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

It might go something like this: Creator God, we are your family. This church is yours. Out of your glorious riches, strengthen us with your power. We are rooted and established in love because Christ dwells in us. We long to really understand how vast that love is – and to be filled with that love to the point of overflowing. We can be and do what you’ve created us for *only*

through your power at work in us. So be at work in our midst – in us and through us – to your glory and for our neighbors' good.

*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.*

### **Church history perspective on this marker**

Introducing people to Jesus and his life-transforming ways -- encouraging and supporting them as they walk with Jesus -- has always been at the heart of the church's mission. The Book of Acts (2:42) describes the ways in which the early church engaged in this mission.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Their life together was all about encouraging an ever-deepening understanding of and obedience to the teachings of Jesus. Personal spiritual formation was a natural and normal part of their life in community.

From the earliest point in church history, it has been the role of the faith community to instruct and train the young as well as the old in the ways of Jesus. Intentional instruction was accompanied by learning through observation of what it means to live the Christian life. It was an experiential form of learning. The imperative for such formation is undeniable in the Bible. But as the Church in the Western world was increasingly shaped by its culture, this more holistic form of learning was replaced by classroom instruction and a focus on imparting information. The life-transformation that was to be a natural consequence of walking with Jesus and those who know him slowly diminished. Currently, the Church at large is having difficulty finding its way back to the basics. If Christians today are to become spiritually mature, we must find a way for congregations to make spiritual formation, through a life-transforming walk with Jesus, an intentional and primary focus.

### **Covenant history perspective on this marker**

The Evangelical Covenant Church was born out of the Reformation and it was fueled by the passion of the Pietists. Guided by God's word, we banded together to partner with God in his mission in the world. As missional pietists, we had a firm foundation on which to build. True to our Pietistic roots, we long to be a people growing continually deeper in Christ and further in mission. It's not just a nice slogan, it's a necessity. Our movement's focus on ministries of compassion, mercy and justice, as well as our focus on evangelism and church planting, are possible only to the extent that we have a concurrent and sustained emphasis on forming mature, growing disciples.

Our Covenant forebears were prone to asking a question one another, "How goes your walk with Jesus?" More recently as our denominational leaders have looked at Scripture they've noticed four elements or means of spiritual growth. As practices or disciplines within each of these four areas are engaged we cooperate with the Spirit to produce growth. Using the word GROW as an acronym makes these four areas easy to remember.

- God's Word...shaping our actions and our lives

- Relationships...nurturing our growth in community
- Outward Action...using God's gifts in witness and service
- Worship...interacting with and experiencing God

### **Ten suggestions to move forward in this marker**

1. *Notice what you are already doing well in this area.* You are not starting from scratch here. Look at everything you already do, examining its potential for being formative in making disciples (e.g., even the manner in which we run committee meetings can contribute, or not, to making and deepening disciples). Develop a mindset of intentional rather than additional. In other words, this is not about adding new programs to an already full schedule of activities for your church.
2. *Preach/Teach of God's unconditional love.* Creating and sustaining an environment of grace is the rich soil out of which the Spirit can produce growth. Emphasize the role of the Spirit. Our identity in Christ is about a relationship with Jesus who loves us unconditionally. This understanding is crucial in order to keep people from falling into a gospel of performance.
3. *Provide solid instruction so that people know what's true about the Jesus with whom they are walking.* How can you do what Jesus would do if you don't know what Jesus did? And in what ways are you providing space for people to examine their current understandings and measure that current understanding against what they are learning anew about Jesus?
4. *Set an expectation of life-long growth as normative for the Christian life.* This is not only for pastors or for the spiritually elite, but for ALL who walk with Jesus. It's a normal part of our ordinary, everyday lives as we walk with Jesus 24/7. Focus on life-based (walking with Jesus each moment of every day) vs. church-based (merely showing up for what the church offers) discipleship.
5. *Challenge every person to discover their "divine design" – the way in which they are uniquely created to connect with God and to serve the world.* Offer instruction in the spiritual disciplines and spiritual gifts.
6. *Challenge every person to be intentional about their growth.* Plan, promote and implement an Invitation to GROW Sunday each year. Remember the Barna study indication that most people would respond to such an opportunity were it to be provided by their church.
7. *Clarify that spiritual companionship is a natural and normal characteristic of discipleship.* We are not meant to walk this learning journey alone, so equip your people for along-the-way discipleship. It ought to be normal and natural and consistent for us to talk about our relationship with Jesus.
8. *Create a partnership between home and church* and equip parents to provide spiritual nurture for children. Help parents to see this as central to their parenting role.
9. *Tell stories of growth and transformation,* using a variety of means (e.g. art, dance, poetry, song, spoken word). Embrace struggle and difficulty as normative.
10. *Begin with church leaders* (both pastors and lay leaders) as the examples of what you want to see in your congregation. As leaders, remember that you can't teach what you don't know and you can't lead where you won't go. So at your next leaders meeting, ask a question: Is there a particular Scripture God is impressing on you or using in your life right now? How do you see the Spirit at work in your life?

## Five to seven challenges to address

1. *Image of God*: How a person views God (e.g., exclusively as stern judge or nurturing parent or distant benefactor or my very own butler) often determines or at least influences our desire or resistance to being attentive to God and open to the Spirit's work in us. [Good related resource: *Surrender to Love*]
2. *Imitation of others*: Understanding that each person is meant to connect with God but in varying ways saves us from frustration when the disciplines of others we admire don't work consistently for us. While some may thrive spiritually by getting up at 5:30 to read Scripture and pray, others connect best with God by walking through the park at 4:30 in the afternoon. [Good related resource: *Sacred Pathways*, by Gary Thomas]
3. *Individualism/Privatism*: Many of us have been shaped by a culture that encourages and rewards going it alone, but walking with and learning from Jesus is a communal experience. Watch for signs of individualism and privatism in your life together.
4. *Legalism/Rigidity*: Seeing our growth as completely in our control (as opposed to seeing it as fruit of the Spirit's work in us) or as some kind of transaction we make with God is unbiblical. Thinking that we must all connect with God in the same ways (i.e., through the same practices as another) can hinder growth.
5. *The Gospel of Sin Management*: Viewing the gospel as getting a ticket to heaven rather than entering a lifelong relationship is problematic and unbiblical. Such a truncated approach to the gospel creates a church full of lackadaisical people who are stalled in their learning journey. The real truth is that we never graduate from the school of learning with Jesus.
6. *Truncated Formation*: While instruction is important, it is not intended to be an end in itself. It is not enough to know the facts of the Bible. Knowledge is meant to lead to transformation – to move from our head to our hearts and our hands - so that we increasingly incarnate the kingdom values exemplified by Jesus.
7. *Bifurcation of interior life and outward action*: There seems to be a misunderstanding of what it means to attend to our spiritual lives. Jesus was a great example of balancing the contemplative life of prayer with an outward life of action. Walking with Jesus requires both so let's not get stuck in an either/or perspective.

## Relationship to other markers

Walking with Jesus in a way that is life-transforming requires that we know who Jesus is and what Jesus taught. Jesus knew the Scriptures and often quoted from Scriptures in his teaching and in everyday circumstances. Knowing the Scriptures is central. Therefore, the connection of this marker with the Centrality of the Word of God is obvious. We cannot choose to follow only some of Jesus' teachings. A thorough understanding of and familiarity with the whole story of God's people is essential.

Beyond this basic relationship, the reality is that all other markers are dependent upon and derive their strength from the church's ability to develop disciples who -- followers of Jesus who find their identity in him, walk faithfully and humbly with their God and increasingly open themselves to the transforming work of the Spirit.

## **Relationship to the mission priorities**

This marker is of course most closely associated with the Evangelical Covenant Church's priority on Making and Deepening Disciples. At the same time, it is central to Developing Leaders whose character is a reflection of Christ, it is foundational to Starting and Strengthening Churches as well as being critical to our ability to Love Mercy and Do Justice, and it happens all around the world as we Serve Globally in Jesus' name.

## **Case Study**

The leaders of Veritas Covenant were stumped. Throughout their long history they had been known as a church of people with a deep, life-transforming relationship with Jesus. More recently, however, they were seeing a different picture. The Pulse Assessment results had actually come as somewhat of a shock. And as they looked deeper into the situation, it became obvious that they were dealing with two distinct segments within their church.

One segment of the congregation consisted of families with young children. This segment of the church felt their children should receive good biblical teaching. Yet they didn't feel equipped to follow through with that teaching in the home.

The other segment of the congregation consisted of middle- to older-adults who had been raised in the church. They had a pretty thorough understanding of the overarching story of God and God's people. They seemed to be getting bored with and disinterested in the Christian formation programs the church had to offer. Some of the long-standing members who had been key leaders for so many years began to distance themselves.

This evening's Leadership Team meeting was underway and several leaders, without knowing that others were similarly motivated, arrived eager to bring new insights to the discussion about the Pulse Assessment findings. Though Roger had been on the leadership team for only a year, having transferred his membership recently from another church, he could hardly wait to bring some new learnings from a book he had been reading titled *Mansions of the Heart* that outlined seven stages of spiritual growth. Juanita was equally eager to share what she'd recently seen in a summary of a Willow Creek research study called The Reveal Study. And Thomas had been reading Richard Rohr's book *Falling Upward* in which a distinction is made between what is needed spiritually in the two halves of life. It was bound to be a rich discussion with all of these new insights being shared.

Briefly summarized, here are the perspectives of each.

### **Tom Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart: exploring the seven stages of spiritual growth***

(excerpt from chapter 1)

"The problem facing all Christians today is that the process of the spiritual life is not clearly understood or taught in most of our churches and seminaries. Followers of Jesus are left without clear reference points for spiritual maturity or processes to aid progress in their spiritual journey. No wonder so many Christians feel ambivalent about church. They often find that church attendance does not really make a difference."

So Ashbrook offers a roadmap on which to locate ourselves in the spiritual journey so that we can cooperate with God toward Christian maturity.

**Reveal Study's** main conclusion (as summarized by [christiancoachingcenter.org](http://christiancoachingcenter.org)):

The Church and its ministries seemed to have the most influence at the beginning of a person's spiritual growth process. This hand-holding approach appears to be necessary in the early stages of spiritual growth. However, as with adolescents who long for independence, the more mature believers do not seem to benefit so much from programmatic hand-holding – “the institution of the church becomes less central to their faith development.” [also see Statistics section above]

**Richard Rohr, Falling Upward: spirituality for the two halves of life**

(excerpt from Amazon's Q&A with the author)

What do you mean by the two halves of life?

Rohr: The phrase “two halves of life” was first popularized by Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist. He says that there are two major tasks. In the first half [of life] you've got to find your identity, your significance; you create your ego boundaries, your ego structure, what I call “the creating of the container.” But that's just to get you started. In the second half of life, once you've created your ego structure, you finally have the courage to ask: What is this all for? What am I supposed to do with this? Is it just to protect it, to promote it, to defend it, or is there some deeper purpose? The search for meaning is the task of the second half of life. (This is not always a chronological matter – I've met 11 year-old children in cancer wards who are in the second half of life, and I have met 68 year-old men like me who are still in the first half of life.)

Roger was enthusiastic about helping people find themselves on this roadmap of spiritual maturity. Juanita felt certain that Willow Creek's Reveal Study indicated a need to better equip people with tools to sustain spiritual growth throughout their lives. Thomas was eager to apply Rohr's idea that the younger generation in the church needed most of all to be about “creating the container” as a foundation for later development stages.

**Guiding Questions:**

1. How would you describe in your own words the primary challenge(s) of Veritas Covenant as it relates to a life-transforming walk with Jesus?
2. In a world so focused on individualism, how might space be provided within the current reality of this church for the varying maturity levels to engage with one another?
3. In an already stretched congregation filled with people whose lives are as full as they can currently handle, is it possible to encourage and support people in a life-transforming walk with Jesus without adding new programs? What might that look like?

**Coaches/expert practitioners to advance this marker (provide 3 to 5 coaches with contact information each)**

Children and Family Ministry Coaches

[covchurch.org/children/coaching/](http://covchurch.org/children/coaching/)

Youth Ministry Network

[blogs.covchurch.org/ywupdate/ymnldescription/](http://blogs.covchurch.org/ywupdate/ymnldescription/)

Adult Ministry Network

Prayer Retreat Facilitators

Regional Networks of Spiritual Directors



## Resources

- ECC story Webcast archive link (each marker will have its own one hour long webcast)

### - Book recommendations

*Surrender to Love* by David Benner

*Invitation to a Journey* by Robert Mulholland

*Will Our Children Have Faith* by John Westerhoff

*The Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard

*Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster

*Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun

*Sacred Pathways* by Gary Thomas

*Devotional Classics: selected readings for individuals and groups* by Richard Foster

*Spiritual Theology* by Simon Chan

*Mansions of the Heart* by Tom Ashbrook

*Soul Feast* by Marjorie Thompson

- A few workshops, videos, etc (+ relevant ECC “member benefit” resources)

Available through CovBooks.com

New Life in Christ – a mentoring guide for those just entering relationship with Jesus

GROW – a bible study providing basic discipleship principles for small groups

Growing Deeper Practices – a variety of spiritual disciplines with practical how-to

Rock Solid – on the basic tenets of the faith (individual or small group for youth/adults)

Children's Ministry Planning Tool – practical helps for a holistic children's ministry

My GROW Adventure with God ([covchurch.org/resources/my-grow-adventure/](http://covchurch.org/resources/my-grow-adventure/))

Available on ECC Website

ID: Intentional Discipleship – a web-based planning tool for adult discipleship

[covchurch.org/adults/](http://covchurch.org/adults/)

Michelle Sanchez Word of Witness

[covchurch.tv/word-of-witness-michelle-sanchez/](http://covchurch.tv/word-of-witness-michelle-sanchez/)

Garth McGrath Word of Witness

[covchurch.tv/am2012-mcgrath/](http://covchurch.tv/am2012-mcgrath/)

- **Songs/hymns** (412) Be Thou My Vision, (414) I Want Jesus to Walk with Me, (580) God Bless Your Church with Strength, (367) I Want to Walk As a Child of the Light, (420) Teach Me Your Way, O Lord

## Conclusion

A life-transforming walk with Jesus is all about being in relationship, opening ourselves to the Spirit and continuing on a journey of learning throughout our lives. Being intentional to provide instruction, encouragement and companionship is central, not peripheral, to the church's mission. At the same time, it does not require a plethora of programs. Walking with Jesus is always a relationship. Never a formula. Always intentional. Seldom additional.



Other relevant and helpful resources worth noting (if a decision is made to go beyond three)

Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology*,

Tom Ashbrook's *Mansions of the Heart*,

Marjorie Thompson's *Soul Feast*

Adele Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*,

*Sacred Pathways* by Gary Thomas