

3.4 INTENTIONAL DISCIPLESHIP

Opportunities for Ministry — People on the Journey to Maturity in Christ

Ephesians 4:11-16 (TNIV) 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.

When we look at the church, we see a fascinating collection of people seeking to be the body of Christ. This body includes people at various stages on the journey to Christlikeness. Each church must realize that part of its mission involves helping people move along in this journey to maturity (See Ephesians 4:11-16). The following categories identify some stages of connection and maturity that are evident within every congregation, and each category represents a unique opportunity for ministry. The categories will consist of different numbers of people, but the presence of the categories is obvious in every church.

Within the Walls of the Church

Those who are standing at the door, looking in

These people are new to the church. They may be long-time Christians looking for a new church home or Christian community, or they may be people who seek answers to their spiritual questions. Although their spiritual needs differ, they come to the door with similar questions: What goes on in here? Will we be accepted? Will we find God in this place? Wise church leaders recognize these questions, and guide the questioners to discover their answers.

The long-time Christians know the lingo of the church and seek a church where they will feel comfortable but also challenged. Research suggests that most of the people in this group make this decision before the first chord of music sounds. For these people, friendly welcomes and new, yet familiar, language and symbols will encourage them to return.

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The second group, the seekers, will need more guidance as they bring little or limited experience with the words, symbols, and activities of a church. They may know little about the faith, or even God, but the Holy Spirit brought them to the place where they are willing to look inside. Again people in this group require a friendly welcome, but they also need easily accessible activities where they can explore their questions. Tim Morey, in *Embodying Our Faith*,¹ suggests that churches invite and embrace those investigating the faith into the community of faith which allows them to discover faith “from the inside,” rather than having to make up their minds before really experiencing what the Christian life is like.

Each church must ask, “How can our church become a welcoming community to those who are standing at the door, looking in?”

Those who have accepted the invitation to come in

The two groups identified in the first category continue in this category, if they decide to return. The group that is looking for a new church home is looking for friendly people who welcome them into the life of the congregation. They need to find a place to belong and make friends. Also, they need to find a place where they can grow in their faith and understanding, as well as use their gifts in ministry.

Those in the second group, the seekers, benefit from getting involved in the life of the congregation, but they also need to find resources that help them make sense of what they experience in this place. Many come with deep needs, both physical and spiritual, that must be met. In addition, easily accessible ministry opportunities, small groups, and mentors can help them explore their questions.

Each church must ask, “How can our church help those who have accepted the invitation to come in become involved as fully functioning and growing members of this Christian community?”

Those who want to grow deeper in their faith and follow Christ in their daily lives²

In many churches, this category encompasses most of the congregation. These people commit their lives to following Christ and regularly support the church with their participation and resources, both time and financial. This group needs continually to commit to proceeding on the Christ-like journey and growing toward maturity. It is easy for those in this group to become complacent and feel that they know all they need to know about the faith. Motivating them to make a commitment to grow spiritually becomes a challenge for the church. At one time, this group attended Sunday school and worship in order to learn and find fellowship with other Christians. As Sunday school attendance has decreased, many churches now emphasize small groups and ministry teams to provide opportunities for this group to experience the challenge of growing in Christ.

¹ Tim Morey, *Embodying Our Faith*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 88.

² For those familiar with the Reveal study conducted by the Willow Creek Association, this category represents movement two, beginning with Growing in Christ and moving to Close to Christ. Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Follow Me* (Barrington: The Willow Creek Association, 2008), p. 28.

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Recent books, like *Simple Church*³ and *Growing True Disciples*,⁴ identify that many churches promote spiritual growth but fail to define what spiritual growth looks like or to provide resources to help this growth occur. The Covenant Church's Department of Christian Formation identified four areas where Christians need to grow. The GROW acronyms identify these areas which include growing in God's word, Relationships, Obedient living, and Worship. To encourage individuals to encounter what it means to grow spiritually, the Christian Formation department provides a GROW commitment card. (<http://www.covchurch.org/resources/grow-commitment-card/>) This card helps people evaluate their spiritual life and set goals for growing in Christ. To make this even more practical, a working group convened by Steve Burger refined this list into four Indicators of a Growing Disciple of Christ. These indicators include: Communing with God, Connecting to God's Story, Relating with God's People, and Participating in God's Mission.

The Reveal study⁵ conducted by Willow Creek states that all people in a congregation will become stalled and stop growing as Christians at some point. Several reasons for this include personal issues like emotional problems and inappropriate relationships, as well as not making spiritual growth a priority. The study discovered that a renewed commitment to personal, spiritual practices was the most helpful resource for breaking out of the stalled pattern.

Each church must ask: "How can our church help those who want to grow deeper in their faith and follow Christ in their daily lives?"

Those who experience Christ in their daily life and desire to emulate him in every situation

This statement provides a goal for the Christian life, and it is hard to live on this level every moment of every day. Even the apostle Paul says that he had not arrived but presses on toward the goal which he states as "the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (See Philippians 3).

The Reveal study points out that people on this level (Reveal calls it Christ-Centered) seek to put their faith into action. They may prefer to get involved personally in doing ministry instead of attending training classes and small groups. People in this group could become delightful mentors, teachers, and small group leaders for others on the Christian journey, or they may prefer to bring their gifts outside the walls of the church to people in need with nowhere else to turn. At times, this outward focus will frustrate current church leaders, as those who have been counted on to lead in the past move on to other opportunities. The goal, however, is building the kingdom of God and not just church attendance. We can remember the words of Jesus, "Whenever you have done it to the least of these you have done it to me" (See Matthew 25:37-46).

Each church must ask, "How can our church help people experience Christ in their daily life and desire to emulate him in every situation?"

³ Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006).

⁴ George Barna, *Growing True Disciples* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2001).

⁵ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Follow Me* (Barrington: The Willow Creek Association, 2008).

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Beyond the Walls of the Church

Matthew 28:19, 20 (TNIV) *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.*

Millions of people come into contact, directly and indirectly, with our churches every day. The most direct contact is when they interact with people of the church who bring Christ with them to work, school, or neighbors. Others pass by church buildings as they journey through life. Some may notice these buildings as majestic and beautiful structures, while others will see them as representative of a dated philosophy of life. Some will warmly remember a church from childhood, while others will remember a painful event inflicted by the church or people in the church. To many, the church is invisible, just another building along the way, while others view it as an object of scorn based on unflattering representations in the media. All of the passersby represent opportunities for ministry as stated in the verses from Matthew. The challenge for the church includes representing Christ well to those with whom we have contact and becoming lighthouses for passersby who seek truth.

Churches can open the door to new opportunities for ministry when they address, intentionally, the needs of the community and the needs of church members' neighbors and friends. Many churches today look for needs in their communities and physically address those needs, including hunger, homelessness, and financial insecurity. Others seek to solve problems in their communities by studying the issue and developing plans to address them. In some cases, churches become catalysts that bring resources from a variety of sources together to address issues that are too large for a single entity. Still others provide resources and opportunities for learning that address everyday issues like parenting and balancing budgets. In order to become lighthouses and overcome the negative press, we need to open our eyes to our neighborhoods and communities and get involved as the body of Christ.

Each church must ask: "To what issues in our community is Christ calling us, and how can those issues help us become a 'lighthouse' in our community?"

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Discussion Guide – Opportunities for Ministry

Questions for groups to discuss after reading the Opportunities for Ministry article

Introductory Conversation: How do you respond to this presentation on Opportunities for Ministry? How does your church reflect the five groups? Where is your ministry strong? Where is improvement needed?

Use the three questions below to guide your discussion of the five categories presented in the article.

Action/Planning Discussion	What are the needs of people in each group?	What are we currently doing to meet the needs of each group?	What could we do to enhance our ministry to each group?
Group 1: “How can our church become a welcoming community to those who are standing at the door, looking in?”			

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<p>Group 2: “How can our church help those who have accepted the invitation to come in become involved as fully functioning and growing members of this Christian community?”</p>			
<p>Action/Planning Discussion</p>	<p>What are the needs of people in each group?</p>	<p>What are we currently doing to meet the needs of each group?</p>	<p>What could we do to enhance our ministry to each group?</p>
<p>Group 3: “How can our church help those who want to grow deeper in their faith and follow Christ in their daily lives?”</p>			

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<p>Group 4: “How can our church help people experience Christ in their daily life and desire to emulate him in every situation?”</p>			
<p>Group 5: “To what issues in our community is Christ calling us and how can those issues help us become a ‘lighthouse’ into our community?”</p>			

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Concluding Discussion: Conclude your discussion by identifying one to five actions that you will take to enhance your ministry to the five groups discussed as Opportunities for Ministry. Be sure to identify “who will do what by when”.

Our Plan		
Who?	Will do what?	By when?