

Editorial Comment



Moving From Attracting Spectators to Equipping Disciple-Makers

Rick Wood, Editor, *Mission Frontiers*

Some readers may ask, “Why all this talk about how to do church? I thought this was a missions magazine? As we bring the gospel to the unreached peoples, an essential question is what type of church and ministry we will establish among them. Will they be churches that reproduce themselves rapidly by effectively equipping all believers to be disciple-makers so that entire peoples are rapidly discipled? Or will we bring some of the failed models from the West where churches rarely reproduce themselves and few believers are equipped to be disciple-makers or church planters. The kind of churches we plant will also determine whether or not they will in turn send out missionaries.

Like it or not, how we do church in North America does affect the kind of churches that are being planted among the unreached peoples. Our global workers from the West generally plant the same kind of church they have experienced back home. But back home few regularly disciple others and only 19% hold to sound doctrine.¹ Furthermore, many non-Western church planters also look to the West for how to do church and may also get their funding from the West. Often they think that bigger is better and that big churches must be doing things right to have grown so big.

There are a few large churches in the West such as Real Life Ministries, which we featured in our Jan.-Feb. 2011 issue, that are effectively equipping believers to be disciple-makers, but these are indeed the exception rather than the rule. As a result, most of the churches that have been established around the world, both large and small, are based on the traditional Western

model which attempts to attract people to come to their church through various events, programs, speakers and music etc. Such churches select pastors based on how well they can “draw” people to their church, not on how well they can equip believers to be disciple-makers.

So the popular North American model of doing church is not just a U.S or Western church problem. It is a global problem—with huge implications for the effective spread of the gospel to every tribe and tongue. If all we do as mission mobilizers is to raise-up more workers to carry forth a failed Western model of “doing church” to every tribe and tongue, then we will have accomplished nothing of lasting impact.

If I could say one thing to church planters around the world, it would be this, “Please do not follow our popular Western example of how to do church.” We have failed miserably to equip the people in our churches to be disciple-makers and church planters. We have failed miserably to instill in believers the biblical vision of the Great Commission. There are far better church planting models to follow—a number of which are presented in this issue. Rather, let us in the West learn how to do church from the great movements which God is initiating around the world so that all believers everywhere will be equipped for the work of ministry.

The most popular model of church in the West focuses on the Sunday morning sermon and attracting large numbers of people to be spectators at the performance of the pastor and worship leaders in very expensive buildings. This model has been largely successful in raising money to pay pastors, build church buildings and initiate programs

that attract people to the church but has not equipped most believers to grow to spiritual maturity where they can fulfill their intended role as disciple-makers. One famous church illustrates this point.

One Megachurch Gets “Earth-Shaking Wake-Up Call”

A few years ago in 2007, Pastor Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago publically repented of the way that they had been doing church. They had spent 30 years creating an elaborate array of programs costing millions of dollars to attract people to participate in their church. At the same time they encouraged other churches to follow their example. They did a multi-year study of their ministry to find out what ministries were actually helping people mature spiritually. Hybels called the findings “earth shaking,” “ground breaking,” “mind blowing,” and “the wake-up call” of his adult life. Hybels summarized the finding of the study this way, “Some of the stuff that we have put millions of dollars into thinking it would really help our people grow and develop spiritually, when the data actually came back, it wasn’t helping people that much.”²

Hybels confessed, “We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and became Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become “self feeders.” We should have gotten people, taught people how to read their Bible between services, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.”³

They had made their people spiritually passive and dependent upon their

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million-dollar programs and their paid, professional staff. In the process, they had not equipped their people to feed themselves spiritually, not to mention to disciple others or plant new churches.

While Willow Creek is an extreme example, it is typical of the “attractional model” of doing church used by most churches around the world. With the attractional model, the focus is on getting people *to come* to the events and programs at the church not on equipping believers *to go* to the lost where they live. The believer becomes a passive spectator and a consumer of the services of the church and its paid, professional leaders, not an equipped minister of the gospel who is able to make disciples or plant churches. See the article by Mike Breen starting on page 27. Because this model fosters dependency, it also fails to equip believers to take ownership of the mission of the church both locally and globally. Could this be why so few

believers are interested in reaching the unreached peoples?

According to Greg Hawkins, executive pastor of Willow Creek, “Our dream is that we fundamentally change the way we do church. That we take out a clean sheet of paper and we rethink all of our old assumptions. Replace it with new insights. Insights that are informed by research and rooted in Scripture. Our dream is really to discover what God is doing and how he’s asking us to transform this planet.”⁴

Rethinking Our Assumptions

That is what this issue is all about—fundamentally changing the way we think about church and the way we carry out its mission because what we are currently doing in most churches is not effective in equipping believers for the work of ministry. All of us need to rethink all of our assumptions about what church is suppose to be and focus on discovering

the principles and practices that God uses to make disciples, and create Church-Planting Movements that build His kingdom. If most pastors continue to focus on growing their existing church attendance rather than on building God’s kingdom by equipping their people to be disciple-makers, then we will continue to get the stagnant results we currently see in the Western church. The goal of the Church must be that every believer is involved in ministry and that every believer is trained and equipped to be a disciple-maker or church planter. If the people in your church are not trained to make disciples who can make disciples, then I suggest you read this issue carefully and see what changes you need to make.

1. Barna Survey Examines Changes in Worldview Among Christians over the Past 13 Years, March 6, 2009, The Barna Group of Ventura, CA, www.barna.org
2. Willow Creek Repents? Why the most influential church in America now says, “We made a mistake.”, URL Scaramanga, October 18, 2007, Discipleship Journal’s Out of Ur. The intersection of ministry and culture. *Christianity Today*. http://www.outofur.com/archives/2007/10/willow_creek_re.html
3. Ibid
4. Ibid



“THESE ARE NOT EVANGELICALS ON A VACATION

but are well-trained short-term volunteers fitting into highly focused and well-executed long-term strategies in pursuit of ONGOING CHURCH PLANTING MOVEMENTS.”

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