

Adapting New Forms of Church to Multiply Disciples

By Alex Matheson

Abstract: Congregational forms in North American tend to utilize attractional models of church that rely on people coming and being taught, heavily dependent on the teacher for their learning. We will explore the freedom and missional responsibility of believers to go, disciple and teach others, using structures and forms that enable learning, participation, community and sustainable discipling movements.

Introduction

It is my experience and opinion that some of the established institutional forms for "doing church" aren't necessarily well suited to the missional function that God has given us in terms of loving our neighbours and making disciples of all nations. We have freedom to start with the New Testament commands and functions that Christ gave us to fulfill and then move to forms and structures that will best accomplish these in sustainable ways. Strive to learn from each other and creatively find ways that work in our individual circumstances.

Typically in the Western world, the approach for spiritual growth and ministry has been to come together for important Bible teaching sermons and to participate in the programs available. This model encourages attendees to return weekly for years, bring others, hopefully doing this for a lifetime. We don't graduate, but rather stay dependent on the institution's resources instead of learning to depend on one another and the Lord.

I contrast this with Jesus' teachings to go, give to one another, love each other, learn from each other and certainly teach others. We are all to be teachers, not just listeners. We can learn to do this!

Let's begin with several Scriptures about the responsibility of believers in mission.

Directives and commands given by Jesus about mission

Go, make disciples of all nations, baptizing, teaching everything [Matt 28:18-20]

Harvest is plentiful, workers few. Ask the Lord, to send workers [Matt 9:35-38]

Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbour as yourself. [Mark 1:29-31]

You, power, Holy Spirit, be my witnesses, ends of the earth." [Acts 1:8]

See also: Mark 16:15, Luke 24:46-49, John 13:34-35 John 20:21, plus your favourites.

Outcomes - A few to consider

- 1 Disciples [believers, followers] maturing in the likeness of Jesus, obedient in all He taught, living by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- 2 Disciples reaching non-believing people anywhere and everywhere.
- 3 New disciples in community, growing in love and learning to teach someone else.
- 4 Jesus' love and power experienced in community and by the unsaved world.
- 5 Other outcomes and implications you see.

Example from Antioch

Acts 11:19-30 records how the church in Antioch got started and grew. Believers came to Antioch and shared the Gospel. The first wave was to the Jews only. But a second wave came and told the Gentiles/Greeks. To help, Barnabas and Saul came and "met with the church for a whole year and taught many of its people" (vs. 19 CEV) Then they left for Jerusalem. Later, when they returned to Antioch, Acts 13:1-5, the remaining leaders were being led by the Holy Spirit and sent Paul and Barnabas on a journey. They functioned well without Paul and Barnabas.

Reasons to Consider New Forms

1. Disciples need to transition from being taught to teaching others

Paul and Barnabas met with the church for a year and were ready to leave. How different from today, where a congregation gathers, and the teaching doesn't result in congregations being self-sustaining and reproducing after a year or even five years. The tendency in congregational forms of church is to come and listen to the same lecture-style teacher year after year. Contrast this with the message of Jesus, to go and make disciples by **each** one doing the teaching. The emphasis in the congregational style of gathering is to bring any new disciples to listen to the primary teacher. This perpetuates the form of one teacher, many listeners. As we make new disciples, purposefully create small communities in which new and more experienced disciples can learn and grow together.

2. Simpler structures enable witnessing, teaching, relating, and loving non-believers

Author and discipler, Leroy Eims said "Telling isn't teaching, listening isn't Learning." There is a big focus in the Christian culture on the "telling" ministry but it doesn't necessarily bring learning, doing, and obedience with respect to disciple-making. Rather than focusing on lecture style learning, let's show others how to interpret, meditate and apply Scripture and how to follow the Holy Spirit. I see a need for greater emphasis on learning communities where everyone participates, listens to God, listens to one another, teaches and reaches out to non-believers. We help each other learn and follow Jesus. This allows for a relational context in which mutual accountability and discipline are helpful. Shouldn't there come a time when

we teach, nurture, and guide one another instead of relying so heavily on the professional pastor/teacher function?

3. Less expensive forms of gathering to free up money for other kingdom priorities

Another aspect of church form relates to money. The millions spent on enabling many people to be informed in one place by the same teachers weekly for years could have an amazing impact on the needs of others. Funds for this impact could be available if believers gathered in small learning communities at very little cost. The money saved from salaries, meeting facilities and parking lots could be used for the needs of our neighbours such as the poor, unemployed, refugees, addicts, sick, elderly and disadvantaged. As well there would be plenty of funds to take the Gospel to other countries and language groups around the world. In Canada, 2013, \$5.2 billion was donated to religious charities.¹ If even half of this went to Christian organizations, imagine what impact that money could have for the weak, needy, abused and unsaved.

Referring to the early church, Ray Mayhew wrote “. . . *The Church Fathers are univocal in their insistence that the bulk of the revenue collected by a local church belonged by right to the poor.*”² Notice in Acts 6:1 the giving was for the needy widows. In Acts 11:28-30, the gifts went for the Jerusalem believers in need. In the context of the blessing that comes from giving, Paul demonstrated the importance of providing for the weak, while he supported himself, Acts 20:33-35. I am not suggesting that there is no place for funding vocational ministry, but rethink how heavily dependent on ministry professionals we have become.

4. Every believer needs to be mobilized because the task is so big, Seven Billion plus³

Jesus said that the workers are few so we desperately need to pray for each disciple to reach and teach someone else. It doesn't have to be complicated or expensive. I meet weekly with a person or two at a time to talk about what the Lord has been teaching us from the Scriptures and how we are living it out. We learn to trust and be honest about our struggles and victories. I try to help those I meet with to gather skills, desire, and disciplines to walk with Jesus and teach others to do the same. We pray and work together to reach out to those without Jesus.

5. Each person is designed with something unique to contribute

We each have unique relationships and qualities to contribute in the process of others becoming like Jesus. In Eph 4:11-13 I believe that Jesus is the primary equipper, preparing each of us for service as one or more of the following: apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor or teacher. These are first of all ministry functions, not titles or offices. I believe we believers will have a strength or tendency toward one or more of these functions in ministry to others. Some have capacity to provide leadership in their area of giftedness

as well. We need all these gifted functions operating both at the ministry level and the leadership level. I have found the work of Alan Hirsh and Michael Frost to be very helpful on this subject.⁴

Implementing New Structures

Function – what we do	Forms – how we do it
Look at the commands of Jesus, the “one another” Scriptures and NT examples.	Meet with an individual or in groups of 3-4, 5-15 and use occasional large events for vision, motivation, challenge, and encouragement.
<u>Go</u> , make disciples, baptizing, <u>teaching</u> Matthew 28:18-20	Teach relationally both during groups and doing life together. Baptizing in hot tubs, pools . . . Coach, mentor, show how and reach out together.
<u>Pray for Labourers</u> , <u>Go</u> I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Luke 10:1-4, Matthew 9:36-38	Pray for labourers, including those not yet believers, to go to the lost, for courage to risk and to reap the harvest now.
<u>Build up</u> believers in love as each does their work, gifts being exercised. Eph 4:9-16, John 13:34-35	Smaller groupings bring close relationships, openness and transparency where struggles and faults can be discussed, learning to love and be loved.
Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you <u>teach</u> and <u>admonish</u> one another. Col 3:16, Gifted teachers Titus 1:9	Teach someone how to study and apply the Scriptures, share during meetings and informal times. Everyone shares, listens and learns.
<u>Worship and Pray</u> for ourselves, others believers, unsaved or hurting friends and emergencies. Acts 12:12, Col 4:2-6.	Encourage prayer by oneself and with others, sharing requests and answers. Pray spontaneously and at special prayer gatherings. James 5:13-16
<u>Meet</u> regularly, purposefully to <u>stimulate love</u> as a lifestyle, to <u>encourage</u> and <u>challenge</u> . Hebrews 10:24-25, 1Cor 14:26	Encourage each one to participate so that others benefit and change to be more like Jesus, the real leader of the meeting. No one to dominate. Be flexible.
Serve one another, discovering your neighbours – socially, geographically, vocationally, spiritually. Gal 5:13-15; 6:2	Individually or in groups serve, help each other with inner needs, daily issues, hard work, friendships and money.

Applications

- 1 Meet regularly with someone who is younger in the faith.** Study, apply the Scriptures, pray, share life issues, have fun, and do outreach together – e.g. Each one read the same chapter multiple times on their own; record highlights, ideas, questions, truths and applications; meet weekly to discuss, confess sins, be accountable and pray.⁵

- 2 **Start a simple Church/gathering:** Are there a few of you that can team up to get it started. Decide on the time, place, purposes, that helps you fulfill the New Testament functions of church. ⁶
- 3 **Take initiative** to get involved with **someone who doesn't trust in Jesus**, help them discover Jesus. Ask: "Who is seeking, has needs I can meet, or wants a friend?" Share your story, read and discuss Scripture. Help them connect with your believing friends. ⁷

- 1 <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2015006-eng.htm> (April 25, 2018)
- 2 Mayhew, Ray. *Embezzlement: The Corporate Sin of Contemporary Christianity?* An Examination of How Local Congregations in the Early Church Spent Their Money and the Implications for Us Today. <http://relationalithe.com/featured-resources/embezzlement-the-corporate-sin-of-contemporary-christianity/> (March 10, 2018)
- 3 Worldometers <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/> (March 20, 2018)
- 4 Frost, Michael, Alan Hirsh. 2003. *The Shape Of Things to Come*. Hendrickson Publishers Chapter 10, The Genius of APEST.
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- 5 Klaas, Jim. *40 Days of Discipleship* resources
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- 6 Cole, Neil. 2010 *Church 3.0*. Jossey-Bass.
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- 7 Halter, Hugh. 2014. *Flesh – Bringing the Incarnation Down to Earth, Learning to Be like Jesus*. David C Cook

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