

PROACTIVE
DISCIPLE
MAKING

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*How to Craft a Strategic Discipleship Plan
that Drives Engagement and Vitality*

Mark Wilson

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I want to give you a *FREE* resource that will help you get the best results from this book. Readers who downloaded the *Checklist* found it helpful in organizing their thoughts and next steps as they customized their own Proactive Strategy. Use it along with the content in Chapter 8 to begin implementing your own strategy to make more disciples now!

checklist

Checklist for Building a Proactive Disciple

Making Culture in Your Church



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DEDICATION



I dedicate this book to the people that support me the most, my family. My wonderful wife, Barbara and my two amazing children, Allen (wife Nikki) and Carol Ann give me encouragement, guidance, and sometimes free editing and writing assistance. Thank you, I love you very much! Dad

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PROLOGUE



The Critical Question

What is the most critical question you are struggling to answer in your church right now? It probably has something to do with re-engaging the folks in your congregation that haven't returned to worship. Before the pandemic the predominant question I was hearing from pastors was "how can we attract new people to worship?" Now, on the other side of the COVID chaos, pastors are asking "how can I get my people to come back to church?"

I would argue that neither of these questions are the most critical questions you should be asking right now. Both of the questions, however, are the symptoms (or are caused by) a more critical question that we have yet to ask. To resolve those questions we need to resolve this more critical question first. That question isn't 'how' but 'why'. Why aren't ¹people returning to your church? Where are they going instead? What are they doing instead?

Before we start discerning the solutions to this problem, it is important to assess the current reality. In a March 2022 Pew Research Center study, they found the following:

About a third of U.S. adults (32%) in the new March survey say they typically go to religious services at least once or twice a month. Of these self-described regular attenders, two-thirds (67%) report that they actually

have attended physically (in person) in the last month, while 57% say they have watched services online or on TV during that period.¹

A third of US adults surveyed indicated they attend church at least once a month. Two-thirds of attenders admit to going in person to a service. 12% of these self-professed regular church goers (monthly attendance or more) stated they neither attended a worship service in person nor watched an online or TV service in March 2022. The prevailing point of the Pew Study shows that the return to in-person church attendance seems to have plateaued since a similar study in September 2021 (9/21 64% vs 3/22 67%).

The reasons people aren't returning to (or for that matter visiting) church are, of course, varied. Obviously in the months just after the COVID Pandemic people were somewhat hesitant about the spread of the virus. Over the past few years, some of those affected may have gotten out of the habit and just haven't regained the motivation yet to start attending regularly again. Whatever the reason, church attendance and engagement statistics have been in decline for many years before the 2020 pandemic. So what is the underlying cause for this decline over the past few decades?

In a 2021 article on [influencemagazine.com](https://www.influencemagazine.com), writer George Wood listed 6 reasons people aren't returning to church. #3 on his list was a "weak attachment" citing that "some churchgoers won't return because they didn't have strong spiritual roots to begin with. The trouble and worries of the past year strangled what little faith they may have had."

The fifth reason was the church added "no value" to their lives. Wood writes "they are reevaluating whether the prior participation in church added value to their lives."²

These two reasons I have highlighted from Wood's article are not COVID specific because the Church has been struggling with them for the past couple of decades, whether pastors want to admit it or not. Unfortunately, the pandemic magnified these

issues in the church and we now see the tenuous relationship many of our “attendees” have with their faith and their connection to the local church.

In light of these two issues, to answer the engagement question most of our churches are facing, I think it is important to look at our mission as a church that follows the teachings of Jesus Christ. Understanding what God is calling us to do is in my opinion the starting place for answering the critical question the church faces today.

We find our mission statement as followers of Jesus Christ in Matthew 28, the passage we call the Great Commission. It is a simple command, yet over the centuries we have made it a complex process for the people Jesus wants us to reach .

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... Matthew 28:19

And over the centuries, the Church has done a great job with the baptizing part, offering a call to action and developing an appropriate liturgy (even though we still argue over the quantity of water required). But the big question that still looms over the Church after 2,000 years is baptism alone enough?

Most churches struggle with this question because it is the rare exception where I find a pastor, anywhere, that isn't lamenting the fact that only “20%” of their congregation is volunteering in the church. And that is not a new problem! A Gallup survey of the percentage of Americans that have volunteered for a religious organization has fallen from 44% in 2017 to 35% only 4 years later. Pre-pandemic statistics for the local church indicate that on average 43% of their adults and students volunteered in some capacity and I am quite sure today's number mirrors the national average or worse.

I would love to blame this decline on the pandemic also, but the peak in the last 20 years was 46% in 2013. And this is just one indication that our discipleship programs and processes aren't being effective. Attendance and giving have both been in decline over the past 20 years and the pandemic has just amplified the overall slide. This is a major motivation why I am writing about a proactive approach to discipleship, more engaged disciples helps the church overcome a lot of its challenges!

The Discipleship Dilemma

Over the years, churches have created millions of discipleship programs, and designed thousands of discipleship pathways, but they obviously have only been somewhat effective. Why is that the norm when we have the world's greatest resources available, the Bible and the Holy Spirit, at our disposal?

I would suggest that we as pastors and church leaders aren't starting at the true beginning of the discipleship journey: helping people find their purpose in life. I hear you. The number of sermons you have preached on "calling" is off the charts. You have told your congregations about the many servants like Abraham, Moses, and Aaron that were ill-fitted for their roles. And you have preached about how Jesus used a ragtag bunch of common folks to share his Gospel in the first century until you were blue in the face. I am sure you did a great job preaching these sermons and announcing the upcoming discipleship class or volunteer opportunity, but how did that approach work out for you?

So, what is the "true beginning" of that discipleship journey onto which we are called to lead our people? In my humble opinion, the starting point is helping people understand the purpose and meaning of their life. I know this is true because for many years, the business world has been helping workers identify their purpose in life and translating that into career slots where they can be effective, successful, and even actualized.

Wouldn't you agree that the ultimate actualization of our lives is to fully invest ourselves into the purpose God has for us?

I know what you are thinking, how can we get our disconnected people to discover and live into their God given purpose when they aren't even coming to church? I think we need to look at our social behavior, particularly as consumers, which started changing before the pandemic to answer that question.

Mark Schaeffer, a best-selling marketing author and consultant to some of the largest companies in the world, wrote about this change in consumer behavior in his book, *Marketing Rebellion, The Most Human Company Wins*. Schaeffer cites that we are in a third marketing rebellion by the participants of the marketplace, basically us. The first rebellion was the era of the "Snake Oil Salesman" and the market rebelled to force vendors to market their products with integrity and honesty. The second rebellion resulted from the invention of the television which led to the TV commercial. The market rebelled by using technology like VHS recorders to tape our favorite programs and fast forward through the commercials.³

And the Third Rebellion, which we have been experiencing for the past few years he labels "the end of control." What we are seeing now is that our marketing processes of the last fifteen years aren't cutting it. We aren't influenced to make a buying decision by fancy ads as much as recommendations by friends or a trusted source. For me personally, the most important step in my buying decision-making, whether online or in a store, is reading the reviews!

What does this have to do with the church you ask? I would argue it has everything to do with the church! For centuries, the church has asked society to conform to its standards – like Sunday

School at 9:30 am and worship at 11:00 am so with a little luck we can beat the Baptists to lunch, and then dinner and study classes on Wednesday nights. The pandemic exposed the truth that we don't need to gather at the church to be church. We aren't going to discuss or debate the importance of corporate worship versus online worship or a hybrid strategy of both. But, as we can see, the reality is your church people have become quite comfortable viewing worship from home and even on their own schedule.

To re-engage our own people and even connect with the next generation of Jesus followers, the church must adapt to this new culture of consumer demand. I want to be very clear that I am NOT suggesting we alter the Gospel message or the Scriptures to fit the cultural trends of the day. What I am suggesting is that we need to rethink how we approach people so that they can access the power of the Gospel message in their lives.

Start at the Beginning of the Story

I think there are two important concepts we need to embrace to create a church culture where people will want to invest their hearts, time, energy, and money. The first concept is one that I have been teaching for several years and is based on the storybrand framework outlined by Donald Miller in his book, *Building a StoryBrand*. StoryBrand helps us create a message for the hero of our marketing, the audience, that will resonate with their particular need or problem.⁴

In StoryBrand parlance, to get a customer, or in our case the person we are trying to reach, to engage with the church's story, we must make them the hero of the story. The hero in a story is the person that has a problem that they can't solve on their own. The role of the church then becomes the guide that helps the hero resolve their problem.

So, to get the people we want to reach to connect with the church, we have to show that we understand the issues they are facing in life and demonstrate how we can help them find answers. Obviously, we all have our specific problems we face as individuals, families, or communities, but there are some common issues that people in various age groups or demographics face in your congregation or community.

We believe in a God that solves any problem if we ask; but the hard part is your church is only equipped to handle one or two usually. To make a long story short, the church must look at the problems or felt needs they are best equipped to address and create the words and images, or as it is called in marketing circles “messaging,” that shows people in your community you can help.

The second concept is related to the marketing rebellion we talked about earlier and how it relates to our mission to baptize and make disciples. In our culture, the consumer is in control of the buying process all the way from finding the specific product they need, researching the specifications, reading the reviews, and then buying it on the preferred platform – in store or online – that best fits their schedule. How do we make it easy for people looking for answers in their lives to find, access, and engage with the church to find the resolution they seek?

This is easily the toughest question to embrace because people face more problems and issues than we can possibly prepare for, and they are specific to each situation. And quite honestly, it is extremely awkward to ask a stranger, first-time visitor, or for that matter a casual church attender what is the biggest spiritual deficiency or moral dilemma they are facing in their life right now!

So, how do we position ourselves to help people if we don't have any way to know their issues? That is the question that I will attempt to answer in this book. We will identify a strategy that gives your audience control over their ability to opt-into a discipleship journey with the church. And then we will look at the process you can employ at your church to successfully guide people on their journeys.

CHAPTER 1



The World We Live In

The church has faced many challenges over the past few decades as societal “norms” and popular culture has shifted to and fro. None were quite so dramatic as the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021. This period not only shined the light on the technical deficiencies many churches faced, but also the cultural issues buried deep in the pews of churches. I remember the day that my personal thinking changed about how we should approach “doing church” very clearly.

It was a slightly overcast morning on Thursday, March 12, 2020, a great day to drive 8 hours to Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida from Knoxville Tennessee. My 26-year-old daughter and I were making a father-daughter trip to the Players Championship PGA golf event for the weekend. We departed early that Thursday morning full of hope and anticipation for a fun weekend.

A global pandemic in the form of the COVID-19 virus had made its way to the United States and rumors had started circulating throughout the sports world that events like basketball and golf tournaments would be canceled to avoid large crowds where the virus could spread. The COVID-19 virus could be transmitted

quite easily through the air and large crowds can become a petri dish of infection. We would come to refer to these large gatherings as “super spreaders.”

At noon eastern time, just as we had cleared the south perimeter of Atlanta, the announcement came across the radio that The Players Championship would be closed to spectators Friday through Sunday (a few hours later, the tournament was canceled entirely). And as we made our way back to Knoxville, my phone blew up with calls from panicked clients that were unsure how they would hold worship services online.

This weekend was the beginning of a chain of events that would alter the social and economic landscape for millions of US citizens. I turned the car around to begin a new journey into a time when the majority of the country would be in lockdown and a new term, *social distancing*, would be the mandate of the day.

Sunday, March 15 would be the last time most churches would be gathering for public worship for many weeks. Conversations were starting to happen that week to discuss the possibility of closing churches, but no one could really imagine not going to church for an extended period of time. How would churches have community, come together in worship, continue personal growth in Bible studies and classes? And the question facing all businesses and nonprofit organizations throughout the country, how will we financially survive the shutdown?

As we have already discussed, the reality was that for the previous few years before 2020, many church-goers had already decided not to attend church for extended periods as we kept seeing in the declining and irregular attendance pattern statistics. But now many churches were being forced to head into a new frontier, a place where most were scared to venture into as well as ill-prepared for the journey.

That place was taking the local church online; digitally entering the internet, the mechanism for the most impactful revolution in communication in human history. This could be just

the impetus the Church needed to move into a new era of unlocking the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the disconnected generations today and those to come in the future.

Through prayer and Bible study, I quickly discerned that the issues the Church was facing were much deeper than streaming a worship service onto an online platform so that we could “have church.” I began asking myself deeper questions. What was the purpose of the church in the first place? How did Jesus teach us to share the Gospel in the first place? Why was this current health crisis causing such a disruption in the church that has survived 2,000 years of historical upheavals?

A Pew Research Center survey⁵ that asked Americans why they do or do not regularly go to church, synagogue, mosque or another house of worship. The overwhelming reason why people attend such services is to feel closer to God. But their reasons for staying away are much more complicated.

Less than one-third (28 percent) say they don’t go because they are unbelievers. Among self-identified Christians, the predominant reason that non-churchgoers offer for not attending worship services is that they practice their faith in other ways. Almost half of evangelicals in this category (46 percent) say this is a very important reason for not going to church more often. The next most common reason evangelicals give for not attending services is that they haven’t found a church or house of worship they like (33 percent).

One-in-five evangelicals says they dislike the sermons, and a little more than one-in-ten (11 percent) says they do not feel welcome at religious services. About one in four (26 percent) cites logistical reasons for not going to religious services, such as not having the time or being in poor health.⁶

Church attendance and regularity patterns are just the tip of the iceberg as we review the metrics of church vitality in the USA. Rick Warren in his iconic book for churches, *The Purpose Driven Church*, defines the 5 purposes of the church as worship,

fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and mission. Pastor Warren tells us “The issue is church health, not church growth! If your church is healthy, growth will occur naturally. Healthy, consistent growth is the result of balancing the five biblical purposes of the church.”⁷

If we are following Rick Warren’s guidance, then our metrics should measure how well the church is doing in balancing the 5 purposes. If asked about how their church is performing in the 5 purposes, most pastors would respond with qualitative and vague answers along the lines of “it feels like we are down” or “I think we are seeing good energy.” The problem is most pastors don’t have the data, much less the metrics, to quantify their church’s health.

During this pandemic crisis and in its aftermath, I realized that churches aren’t connecting or reconnecting with people because churches don’t have a proactive strategy for making more disciples. The local church doesn’t have a specific plan for intentionally and consistently engaging unique people in a diverse culture and a process for guiding them into their specific discipleship journey. It was obvious that most churches lacked the technological savvy to compete with the cultural attractions around us to engage the time, attention, and hearts of the people around us that need to connect with Jesus. But the problems were much deeper than bandwidth and live streaming.

I came to realize that there are many roadblocks that stand in the way of the church’s ability to connect with people of the new culture. Unfortunately, most of these roadblocks are traditional beliefs or systems that have been entrenched in the church for decades and even centuries. Let’s take a quick look at these roadblocks and how they impede our ability to engage the hearts and minds of our people.

The Roadblocks for the 21st Century Church

Many churches, mostly the larger and mega variety, had been streaming worship services online for the better part of the last decade. Some were even using video to provide additional teaching and discipleship resources to their people. A very few were even able to successfully use the internet to connect with people seeking hope and wholeness in their lives. The vast majority of churches, however, were doing none of the above and only begrudgingly using social media sparingly as free media to “get their church out there.”

On March 22, 2020, most churches in the US were faced with a new reality: how do we do church online? The roadblocks they faced were a line of orange barrels and barricades that had been set into place for many decades. You see, the first roadblock standing in the way of the Church that day was its centuries of tradition and practices. *Could local churches overcome their own history and tradition to embark on a new way to be the church in their community?*

The Church is the Building After All

For more than a millenia, Christians have built sacred buildings for people to gather for worship, receiving of the sacraments, and sharing the Gospel message with the world. In the early settlement of the United States as pioneers moved westward, church buildings were erected and then towns sprang up around them building strong communities. Over the centuries, church buildings became shelters of safety during times of war, suppliers of food during times of economic hardship, and even places of learning for the poor and disenfranchised. Church steeples were the enshrined landmarks for hope, health, and progress in communities around the world.

The Church's mantra for most of my life has been "the Church isn't a building, it's the people." In 2020, it's as if God said, "let's put your money where your mouth is!" Churches were locked, people were asked to shelter in place, and the Church was now forced to engage with their communities via digital media. The good news was many people responded; the bad news was many churches were not prepared to connect. But the short-term goal was to weather this storm by slowing down the spread of the virus so that we can gather again in the comfort and safety of our church buildings in a few weeks. Little did we know what lay ahead for the Church in the months to come.

Staffing and Equipping for 1970

Another major roadblock the Church faced in 2020 was the fact that their resources - human, financial, and technological - were heavily invested for an in-person, analog experience. The staff was built around an on-site programming model that required a building for classes and people for teaching. I walk into churches every week that look the same as they did in 1970.

The production team probably consisted of volunteers that manned the sound board and ran the presentation slides (if the church had installed screens in the last 30 years). A strategy did not exist for distributing content online or the means to create video content for many churches until March 17, 2020 when churches were asked to close their doors to avoid the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus in large crowds. Then the scramble began!

But then a surprising thing happened; many churches rose to the occasion to present their worship service, or at least some semblance of a service, online for their people. Some churches even had a modicum of staff that grasped digital distribution of content and were actually able to present their programming online. The most popular tool became ZOOM, a video meeting

app that allowed Sunday School classes, Bible studies, small groups, and church staff to meet online.

Churches were able to find enough money to subscribe to apps and buy some equipment that would help them stream their services and other content online. Some were even able to enlist the help of video professionals for recording and editing video content to be presented online. Most of their congregations tuned in, but they might as well have been watching Netflix, because most churches were doing the best they could just to get content online. Making connections with new people or building disciples was a whole new problem.

When churches shared their first worship experience online, the “toothpaste was out of the tube;” there was no turning back. But the problem was and is that church budgets are built for an in-person, and mostly analog (non-digital) experience, whether for worship or discipleship. Since there had been no need for a digital church strategy, most churches continued following a model with staff equipped to create a church experience for 1970.

Engaging the Lethargic Laity

Another ancient issue arose when churches couldn’t “gather together” for worship anymore. It became a time when churches needed “all hands on deck” for the forced migration to the new, online environment. But the expectations we had placed on our congregations to “be the Church” were primarily lip service.

The old 80/20 rule that 80% of the volunteer work in church was done by 20% of the people was probably closer to 90/10. And I am not blaming the church staff, the leadership, or even the congregation individually; there is enough blame for everyone on this issue. Now that church doors were closed, the people were free! Free from their obligation to attend church, to serve as a volunteer, and to give their offerings.

But then another surprising thing happened; church people rose to the occasion! They attended online worship and even hosted online watch parties to invite their friends to worship with them. Many continued giving their offerings, some even giving more than normal. Unfortunately, almost all churches have people in their pews that are professionals in the skills needed to create an engaging, online experience. When the doors closed, it became too late to leverage those skill sets for quality engagement and the order of the day was mere survival.

The Church faces many roadblocks as we move into the future. Most are easily navigated, but some will require a great deal of change in how we approach “doing church.” All churches have access to digital technology that will connect them to a new, online world. And, they have talented clergy and laity to use that technology to connect the Gospel of Jesus with this new world. But the Church has to find the courage and discipline to overcome some of its outdated traditions, reorganize its workflow around a digital process, and summon the willpower to lead the change into the next evolution of God’s Church.

The good news for the Church is that most local churches survived 2020 and 2021! My goal as we move further away from the pandemic and embrace the digital transformation of the past quarter century is to help churches develop new approaches to reaching people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I am convinced that if the 21st century church embraces a discipleship driven culture, we will overcome all these roadblocks and will grow into vital congregations of people that are pursuing Jesus on their own discipleship journeys and helping others along the way!

As I look ahead at the church my grandchildren will attend, I see a vitality and energy that results from a community that is connected daily and not just once weekly. My prayer is that my children and their children will be better equipped to navigate a Spirit led life because they have the tools to learn, share, and stay

connected with their community in the palm of their hands (or on their wrist!). My hope is that my work before they were born will help them experience what the first century followers of Jesus experienced:

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Acts 2:46-47
NIV

This book is written to help pastors and leaders clarify the problems facing the church as we build a different way of doing church that connects with people living in a new culture. I have three goals for this book:

1. Help you clearly understand the problems we face as the Church in our transition into the next generation of Christianity.
2. Give you a strategy to successfully connect with people to make disciples for Jesus Christ.
3. Build a system and process to help your team guide more people on their discipleship journeys.

It has to be done and I believe that today's pastors and church leaders can usher their local churches into an exciting new future. Are you ready to take the next step?