

Author's Introduction

The Local Church: Is Yours *Really* a Place of New Life?

Many people come to church seeking new life: forgiveness, removal of guilt, joy, peace, hope, and victory over life's struggles and sin's temptation. But this new life is proving quite elusive for many who faithfully attend services, get involved in the church's ministries, try harder to have devotions, and to pray. Their hard work and unmet expectations collide, leaving many Christians defeated, ineffective, and even disillusioned with their faith.

This disillusionment is chronicled in scores of statistics on the failing state of Christians to live the new life that, ironically, is to define their existence. Regarding this, respected researcher on matters related to the local church and the Christian faith, George Barna, writes in his book, *Revolution*:

“One of the greatest frustrations of my life has been the disconnection between what our research consistently shows about churching Christians and what the Bible calls us to be. Granted, we are sinful creatures and will never achieve perfection on this planet; only when we are reunited with God in heaven will we experience a fully restored state. *However, if the local church is comprised of people who are being transformed by the grace of God through their redemption in Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit, then their lives should be noticeably and compellingly different from the norm*” (emphasis mine).

**Effective
discipleship reaches
the heart.**

The lives of many Christians are not “compellingly different,” as evidenced by the following excerpts from Barna's research:

- Half of all believers say they do not feel they have entered into the presence of God or experienced a genuine connection with Him during the past year.
- Fewer than one out of every six churching believers has a relationship with another believer through which spiritual accountability is provided.
- The likelihood of a married couple who are born-again churchgoers getting divorced is the same as couples who are not disciples of Jesus.
- A large majority of churching believers rely upon their church, rather than their family, to train their children to become spiritually mature.

We must begin to believe that ministry is not simply about bringing people into the Christian Faith, but it is about their transformation in the image of Jesus Christ, presenting them complete in Christ, which is a matter of God’s Holy Spirit working sovereignly in the life of the individual through those with whom they are in relationship—beginning with their own household, and then members of God’s household, the church.

- In an average month, fewer than one out of every ten church families worships together outside of a church service; just a few pray together, other than at mealtimes; and the same minimal numbers study the Bible together at home or work together to address the needs of disadvantaged people in their community.
- Although the typical believer contends that the Bible is accurate in what it teaches, he or she spends less time reading the Bible in a year than watching television, listening to music, reading other books and publications, or conversing about personal hobbies and leisure interests.
- When asked what constitutes success in life, few believers define success in spiritual terms. Most describe outcomes related to professional achievement, family solidarity, physical accomplishments, or resource acquisition.
- When given the opportunity to state how they want to be known by others, fewer than one out of ten believers mentioned descriptions that reflect their relationship with God.

Perhaps the title of Josh McDowell’s recent book, *The Last Christian Generation*, does the best job of summing up the situation. He states, “I realize the title of this book may be shocking. But the decision to call this *The Last Christian Generation* was not made lightly nor was it done for sensationalism. *I sincerely believe unless something is done now to change the spiritual state of our young people—you will become the last Christian generation*” (emphasis mine)!

Traditional Ministry Approaches Are Struggling Mightily—or Failing

With the best of intentions, our churches have invested heavily in new programs and more educated, better-paid professionals to staff them. Church leaders flock to conference after conference seeking the latest solutions to *chronic* ministry problems. The new curricula and approaches they bring back may provide some initial relief but any momentum gained is often hard to maintain against the demands of keeping all of the other ministry plates spinning. Much effort is expended, but not much is really changing for the better in the lives of the people *or* in the lives of the leaders.

The households of church leaders are sometimes the greatest victims. H.B. London in his book, *Pastors at Greater Risk*, states that

80% of pastors think that pastoral ministry adversely affects their family. This is a very troubling statistic. If the ministry being done to help build relationships in the home is adversely affecting the home lives of those who lead those ministries, then we have an untenable solution.

While the challenges in the church and the home are significant, they are not insurmountable. The situation can be corrected because God is sovereign and He has provided what we need to know in His Word to fix these problems. In fact, He has already said that He will use even these problems for our good (Rom. 8:28–29)! We have great hope because we serve a living God Who has promised to prepare a bride for His Son. Praise God that He continues to work through us to accomplish His plan for His people.

The first step to regaining health in the church and in the home is to properly diagnose the problem.

The Problem: We are Missing the Heart

The problems that we so painfully see all around us—individuals not living the new life in Christ, youth rebelling against the faith, the weakened state of relationships including marriage, family life, and church—are all really just *symptoms* of a much bigger problem: *the heart*.

Accomplishing the Great Commission—evangelism and discipleship—is fundamentally a matter of focusing ministry on the heart. The Bible is quite clear that it is the heart of man that is the problem (Isa. 29:13; Matt. 15:18–19). Behavior changes when the heart changes (Matt. 23:25–26). Yet, much well-intentioned ministry leaves the heart *unaddressed, and unchanged*. We are dishing out great information and telling people what they need to do to live the Christian life. This looks good but offers a false sense of effectiveness until tragedy strikes, the façade comes down, and the true heart condition is exposed.

Because churches have youth ministries, because churches organize couples' retreats, because churches use the latest evangelistic approaches, styles of music, or because fathers are encouraged to lead family devotions and to take responsibility for the teaching and training of their children, we think that we should expect to see positive change. Because something is being done, we conclude that something must be changing for the better. But not much is changing because

This Guide provides a simple, systematic exposition of the biblical vision presented in my first book, *Uniting Church and Home*, as well as a four part process that most any church can use to begin implementing it.

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Ephesians 4:15-16**

we're fundamentally missing the heart of the problem, which is the heart. While much is happening, things remain basically the same. We're focusing too much on symptoms and not enough on root causes; too much on external changes and not enough on heart change.

I believe church leaders earnestly desire to see their church members change. I believe that many understand at some level, the importance of the heart in affecting lasting change. But this knowledge does not translate easily in traditional ministry design. Thus, many churchgoers and leaders are disillusioned, frustrated, and in doubt.

“All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

—2 Timothy 3:16-17

The Prevailing Concept of Discipleship Undermines our Efforts to Reach the Heart

Discipleship as modeled by Jesus is quite different from what we normally see and experience in our churches and in our homes. Jesus—the most effective discipler ever—used a very personal, intimate, everyday-life approach to discipleship that reached the heart. In stark contrast, today we seek the efficiency promised by mass discipleship. Funneling people through programs devoid of modeling relationships isn't working very well because it misses the heart.

God's Word Tells us How to Minister to the Heart

Churches today are looking too hard to the culture and not enough to the Word of God for ministry design. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). According to this passage, God's Word—his whole Word, Old and New Testaments—is sufficient not only for the message of salvation, it is sufficient for the means to delivering and applying that message so that people's lives are indeed changed: renewed through a life which rests, trusts, and abides in Jesus Christ.

We stand strongly on the authority and sufficiency of God's Word regarding its *message*, namely that man is a sinner who cannot save himself and therefore is in need of the saving and transforming grace of God through Jesus Christ. But what about the *means* for how God wants that message to be delivered, planted, and cultivated in people's lives?

Do we believe that the Scriptures speak authoritatively on ministry design? Or, have we deemed what we read in the Bible as antiquated and therefore of little value to us today?

Effective Discipleship Reaches the Heart

The Holy Spirit is the One who changes the heart (Eze. 36:26). We cannot change our own heart, much less the heart of another individual including our spouses, children, extended family, and friends. But God does change the heart. Here's the key: In the Scriptures and in the life of Jesus, God has already given us a basic design for how He intends to change someone's heart that is centered squarely on the instrument of intimate, heart-level relationship.

Paul writes to the Thessalonians, "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us" (1 Thes. 2:8). Paul, as Jesus, shared saving faith, not in a classroom, but within the context of life itself.

Effective Discipleship is Done by Ordinary People

The discipleship model used by the two most prominent New Testament figures, Jesus and then Paul, centered on ministering through ordinary people in the milieu of ordinary life. The disciples were ordinary men. "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). Think about it, Jesus spent his time training not the "best and brightest," but ordinary men. Jesus praised His Father that the truths He taught were hidden from the religious intellectuals of His day and revealed to babes (Matt. 11:25). Yet, today, we clearly value the ministry of the extraordinarily gifted to the detriment of the ordinary people of God forgetting that God can use ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary results.

Some have excellent teaching gifts and abilities. However, the overwhelming majority of discipleship cannot occur in Sunday school. Biblical discipleship occurs *in* the ordinary, *to* the ordinary, and *through* the ordinary. This requires basic faithfulness, not a seminary degree or a good speaking voice.

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The answers to—name the issue—youth rebellion, for example, are much bigger than can be solved by a professional youth director. In this Guide, I will present that this involves God working through the ordinary relationships in the home: parents, particularly the head of household, equipped not merely to help their children do the right things, but to help transform their hearts in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This transformation process also involves relationships in the church including siblings, friends, singles, and seniors. We all need each other to grow effectively in Christ (Eph. 4:15–16).

Effective Discipleship is Accomplished Through Ordinary Relationships

“God’s church runs on regular.”

—Gregg Harris

God’s Word says that these and many more *household* relationships, lived out in the church and in the home, are vital to effective accomplishment of the Great Commission. Yet, when it comes to how we design equipping ministries, how much focus do we place on relationships? For example, how important is it that a father is regularly interacting with his wife and children on a heart level? How important is it that our youth are spending time with and learning from our seniors? How important is it that the leaders of the church, the elders (1 Tim. 3:5) manage their households well or live out their leadership role as a father-figure (1 Pet. 2:1–5; 1 Cor. 4:15; Phil. 2:22) like Paul demonstrated? All of these are important. Yet, these vital relationships are discounted or missed altogether when we become too focused on the traditional ministry design.

The vision promoted throughout this Guide comes from God’s Word, not from what works (or appears to work) for other churches, pop culture, pop psychology, or societal trends. In testimony to the biblical nature of this vision, churches across denominational lines and cultures across the globe have found these principles to be effective for thousands of years.

A Future and a Hope

I firmly believe that the new life, the transformation we so desperately seek in ourselves and in those closest to us, awaits.

What I see God doing represents a budding revival and reformation that is possible when we set aside our own ideas and focus instead on what God shows us in His Word about how He has designed ministry.

Eric E. Wallace, Midlothian, Virginia, July 2009