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WILLIAM MANCINI AND CORY HARTMAN

“Every now and then God chooses to plant someone on our planet with an extra measure of capacity and insight. Without question, Will Mancini is one such person. *Future Church* is more than a must-read. With the cosmic shifts we have experienced recently, the church must pivot to a new normal to remain relevant. This book provides the road map.”

Randy Frazee, pastor, Westside Family Church,
and author of *The Connecting Church 2.0*

“Will Mancini once again demonstrates a characteristic genius in helping churches and denominations to recalibrate around essentials, to recover their distinctive callings, and so to find wholesale renewal. A rare and timely gift.”

Alan Hirsch, author and activist

“*Future Church* is a fascinating consideration of why the church in North America has failed to create multiplying, disciples-making-disciples communities. Will Mancini and his team have been a consistently helpful guide to us for many years on creating good church culture. *Future Church* will help you grow this culture in your ministry as well!”

J. D. Greear, pastor, The Summit Church

“Will Mancini is one of the leaders I learn from and a thinker whose insights I trust. Smart leaders will dive into what Will has to say about the future church.”

Carey Nieuwhof, founding pastor, Connexus Church,
and host of *The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast*

“Through the years, Will Mancini has challenged me and the church I pastor to think deeply and critically about the church and its mission. This book adds to the list of tremendously helpful resources from Will, teaching us how to engage in the mission strategically and faithfully in the twenty-first century.”

Vance Pitman, senior pastor, Hope Church Las Vegas

“Most church leaders I work with have been wrestling with a gnawing feeling that something needs to shift in our churches. Are we truly making disciples or just entertaining followers? What should we be measuring? How do we know we’re accomplishing our mission? *Future Church* is an essential read for every church leader who is committed to defining real growth in a new era of ministry leadership.”

Jenni Catron, leadership coach and founder of The 4Sight Group

“Future Church is an important and timely book for advancing the cause of reproducing disciples in the church. Let Will Mancini guide you into deeper thinking about Jesus’s mission and more imaginative leadership for these challenging days ahead.”

Dave Ferguson, lead pastor, Community Christian Church, and author of *Hero Maker: Five Essential Practices for Leaders to Multiply Leaders*

“Will and Cory have delivered an intelligent, imaginative, biblical journey, inviting followers of Jesus to a fresh disciple-making partnership. Paradigms and procedures that I’ve been suspicious of for a long time are exposed throughout this book. I can now see the future in a new light.”

Stan Endicott, cofounder and chief culture officer, The Slingshot Group, and coauthor of *Improv Leadership: How to Lead Well in Every Moment*

“If you want to know what the future of the church is going to look like, read this book. Will is not only one of the most future-minded leaders I know, he’s also deeply informed about past and present church practice. His ability to see and systematize the shift that is coming is impeccable. This is going to become required reading for my entire leadership team.”

Daniel Im, pastor, Beulah Alliance Church, and author of *No Silver Bullets: 5 Small Shifts That Will Transform Your Ministry*

“Future Church is a master class in Real Church. Don’t read this for ideas, insights, and initiatives that last a day or a week. Enroll your mind in this book for thoughts and tasks that linger and lead for a lifetime. Every page will challenge, delight, inspire, and deepen your church and raise your game.”

Leonard Sweet, author, professor, and founder of Preach the Story

“Future Church invites twenty-first-century followers of Jesus to re-anchor in the ancient charter of a radically missional movement. The book navigates the polarity of church models mired in well-intended handicaps by offering refreshing *tertium quid*-type clarity on what could be, what must be. As a constructive plea, *Future Church*’s experience-based frameworks and principles invite leaders to reject the enduring growth limitations of yesterday’s compromised models for breakthroughs today.”

Mike Sharrow, CEO, The C12 Group

FUTURE CHURCH

7 LAWS OF REAL CHURCH GROWTH

WILL MANCINI AND
CORY HARTMAN



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Will dedicates this book to his father and mother, William and Leila Mancini, who model Future Church by being faithful to the organized expression of church over a lifetime without compromising fervent relational disciple making, even when the church didn't acknowledge it.

Cory dedicates this book to his children, Jack, Orphie, Arwen, and Israel, disciples of Future Church.

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FOREWORD

In January 2020, I read about a virus in Wuhan, China. I'm not sure exactly why, but I thought at the time this might be something big.

I began telling people in February we were going to see schools and churches close, and we would tell our grandchildren one day about this spring. People were pretty skeptical—for about a month.

Since I started preparing my staff at the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College in February for the coming virus, we were ready to provide a number of resources to churches early on when the pandemic hit.

I was probably patting myself on the back for my foresight when Donna, my wife, asked me, “So, if you saw this coming, why did you leave our retirement in the stock market?”

She was right. I did not see what I needed to see. And probably the only reason that I even took the virus seriously at first was I had watched the movie *Contagion* over the Christmas holidays.

You see, telling the future about anything is hard. Telling the future about culture is hard, and discerning the future church might be even harder. There are three things that we might want to consider as we think about the future of the church.

First, *patterns are hard to break.*

Even in the pandemic, churches discovered pretty quickly how hard it is to adjust to a dramatically different reality. Our church life, Sunday services, organizational approach, and general patterns of worship have really not changed that much for a generation.

Suddenly, every pastor in America became a televangelist. Ministers who resisted streaming their services suddenly embraced the technology; some who had criticized online services found themselves doing them. The coronavirus forced rapid change for a season.

However, my bigger concern is not that things will all change. It is that things will go back to the way they were. That's what happened during wars and economic downturns for centuries. The best predictor of the future is the immediate past. The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.

If we are going to see God's people fully unleashed for God's mission, it will take some pattern breaking, and that's hard.

But the possibility for change is the greatest in tumultuous times. Things that have been building, perhaps unnoticed in the grind of day-to-day life, suddenly seem to accelerate in seasons of uncertainty. And the hope of real change is, I think, before us today.

Second, change builds but then surprises us.

As change accelerates there are breakthrough moments. Tipping points, some call them. There was John Huss and other dissenters who had concerns about the established church, and suddenly there's the swing of a hammer and Ninety-Five Theses are nailed on a church door. At that moment things tipped and the Protestant Reformation broke through.

We may be in one of those moments in regard to the church and its mission. We need to lean into the moment to see how God is moving in our midst.

Movements seem to spread out of nowhere, but their flood is preceded by tributaries preparing the way. What started as local change then becomes widespread in its impact.

We are in unprecedented times, yet none of this has caught God by surprise. He is the God of moments and movements.

What you will read in *Future Church* will help you perceive the movements breaking through our current moment. Will Mancini has seen a number of breakthrough moments in churches just like yours. Let his wisdom help you ride the wave of change.

Because that's what leaders do.

Finally, leaders play a major role in change.

Leaders give courage and guidance to ride these waves of change. This is why the early adopters and early majority play such a huge role in the diffusion of innovation, whether it's Apple computers with people like Steve Jobs or the rise of contemporary worship through places like Calvary Chapel.

We may be in one of those moments. It's a tumultuous time, and tumult is a catalyst for change. This is where Will Mancini and Cory Hartman's book can help us. In *Future Church*, you will read about the Seven Laws of Real Church Growth. At the heart of this is the question: What will you do with this ministry moment? Will is especially equipped to lead us in a moment like this.

We are never going back to the status quo before 2020 and COVID-19. That much is clear. What is less clear is how you will lead moving forward. In the following pages you will see not how to endure this season with a survivor's mindset but how to lead your church to its greatest disciple-making capacity in its history.

Since you are reading this book, you are thinking about the future. That's good. You won't get it all right, as my wife reminded me, but you can be better prepared for that moment of change.

Will began writing this book before the pandemic hit to help leaders look at the next twenty years of ministry. This year's events only accelerate the need for principles like he explains in these pages. You can lead the people God called you to lead, and this book can help you lead well.

Ed Stetzer, professor and dean at Wheaton College and executive director of the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center

INTRODUCTION

Every Church's Primary Problem Today

 On a single day not long ago, I (Will) spoke in two different cities with two very different pastors who put their finger on the exact same problem. After ten thousand conversations with pastors, two simple and unexpected statements converged with spontaneous and unbelievable insight. The convergence was as rare and unforgettable as a solar eclipse, only the effect was not a literal blocking of light but quite the opposite. The statements became a portal to see the future of the church.

I spent the first half of the day with the sixty-five-year-old pastor of one of the most successful Presbyterian churches in the country (according to attendance and giving standards, of course). This good man served the Lord well over his ministry and was now transitioning to a new life stage. Yet as he reflected on a lifetime of preaching, he privately expressed his quietly smoldering discontent about the condition of his church. “Will,” he told me earnestly, *“the church has got to be more than the Rotary Club with a choir.”*

After this conversation I hopped on a plane to another city. A thirty-five-year-old, newly minted lead pastor picked me up at the airport. He was still enjoying the favor that comes from the

honeymoon phase of a pastoral tenure at his growing, midsized Baptist church. There was much excitement about the future in his congregation. In the car I asked him about his number one challenge. “Will,” he replied, *“I have to convince my people that church is more than a show on Sunday with a few hooks in the water throughout the week.”*

And there it was: the beating heart of two passionate pastors testifying to the stopped heart of Jesus’s mission in the organized church. The problem was not conveyed as a meteor-colliding crisis but as the pervasive pressing concern. The short phrases revealed at least five metaphors for the church: business, club, entertainment, performance, and bait on a hook. I don’t think the young pastor had ever been to a Rotary Club, and I don’t think the retiring pastor had ever fished with a trotline. But they were certainly on the same page.

Two successful pastors—almost two generations removed in ministry experience, on opposite ends of the theological and stylistic spectrum—articulated the exact same problem. They lead churches that by all accounts are thriving, but they secretly suspect that many of their people have little clue about the church Jesus actually started. People come to church but don’t “get” church. The churches they serve feel like a pseudochurch. Something is missing.

My conversations that day revealed to me an extraordinary fact: it took one generation in time (from 2000 to 2020) for every

The church in
North America
is dramatically
overprogrammed
and underdisciplined.

generation of church leader in every faith tribe to feel the same primary problem—namely, that the church in North America is dramatically overprogrammed and underdisciplined. Of course, this challenge has been expressed at many other times in many different ways. But in our moment the named problem carries

an unprecedented gravity and rings with piercing clarity. It is more than the observation of those gifted to be innovators or a

courageous few. Instead, every pastor has begun to ask themselves with greater freedom and conviction, “Are we making disciples or faking them?”

Leaders like the two pastors I talked to feel the expectations of Church As We Know It weighing down upon them, but the pressures do not line up with what they are truly called to do. That’s what *Future Church* is all about: returning the organized church to the passionate conviction of disciple making in the way of Jesus.

To state the problem in its purest form I will articulate the substitute mission of the church that these two pastors are trying to correct. Think of this as the actual aim of local churches across the land that have so normalized mission drift that magnetic north barely registers on the compass. The functional Great Commission in North American churches has become:

Go into all the world and make more worship attenders, baptizing them in the name of small groups and teaching them to volunteer a few hours a month.

The purpose of *Future Church* is to provide a pathway that does not abandon the church to its current trajectory but boldly hails the need and reveals the opportunity to reset our compass in our cultural moment.

The *Future Church* Journey

Before we get started, I want to explain the authorship and the voice of this book. *Future Church* was coauthored by myself and my friend Cory Hartman, a writer and pastor. This book comes from both of us, and our ideas weave together throughout. Yet to make for a smoother and simpler reading experience, the book is written as if spoken by me individually. You can think of me as your guide on a journey crafted by us both.

To best help you, I start by escorting you uncomfortably deep into this problem that we are all familiar with but often do not fully understand. In order to awaken clarity and activate progress, I paint the contrast between faking disciples and making disciples in the church today. My goal is not to be simplistic or sassy but to apply my missional heartbeat and prophetic voice with a bit of grit. It has been said that prescription without diagnosis is malpractice. I want you to gain new appreciation for the breadth and depth of the dilemma. But I walk you deep down in order to lift you higher up—up with new vision and up with renewed conviction. There is a solution on the other side.

The journey of this book can be mapped this way:

- One problem
- Two rooms
- Three churches
- Seven laws
- One master tool

That is:

- **One problem** of faking disciples—the primary problem of every church today
- **Two rooms**—a simple picture that both unveils today’s crisis in the North American church story and gives you help and hope for your church’s story
- **Three churches** that when seen together become the most useful typology for understanding the North American church over the next twenty years
- **Seven laws** of organized disciple making for real church growth
- **One master tool** to map the way forward, which consists of **two funnels** derived from the modern ministry model and Jesus’s multiplication model

I got the idea for a book on Future Church when my thoughts startled me awake in the dark, quiet hours one night in 2016. Four years later, when we were putting the finishing touches on our first draft in the spring of 2020, many churches had stopped meeting for public worship because the COVID-19 pandemic had struck North America.

It astounds me that this book was being finalized under these circumstances. All of us had been hearing for a long time that the future was coming fast. But while this was being written, change overtook the church at supersonic speed. It felt like we passed from 2020 to 2030 overnight.

I realize that it's foolhardy to make sweeping predictions about something I am still living through in July 2020. Still, from this vantage point, I believe that the COVID pandemic probably constitutes the greatest innovation opportunity that leaders will have in a lifetime. Yet there is a danger that the church will miss the moment.

Shortly after the pandemic froze life as we knew it, my friend Neil Cole gave me perhaps the best way of thinking about the crisis as it pertains to the church. Neil said that COVID-19 is a shot across the bow of cultural Christianity. He meant that our inability to gather in customary fashion for weekend worship had the potential to dislocate and purge the lasting remnants of a Christianity rooted in local culture and social custom instead of a conviction to follow Jesus.

A warning shot is scary, but it's also gracious, just as God's confusion of the languages at Babel was a scary act of grace. In Genesis 1:28, God commissioned the human race to "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." By Genesis 11, the human race was failing to obey the instruction. Instead of spreading out as instructed, people clustered together to make a name for themselves and rival God. With forceful mercy, God disrupted their construction to reengage their commission.

In similar fashion, the coronavirus forcibly and lovingly reveals what is true about the church in the early twenty-first century and

offers us the chance to renew our obedience to the Great Commission. When a church can't cluster together for weekend programming, it shows how faithful it is to the mission when it's scattered.

Meanwhile, every week of the pandemic we have been flooded by a hot mess of tips and tactics for how the church should respond. As useful as these might be for making quick fixes to keep things rattling along, they don't address the much greater vulnerabilities the pandemic exposes. At best they help leaders adapt, but they don't help them innovate.

Imagine, for instance, that the internet breaks tomorrow. The chaos it would wreak on the world would make COVID look like child's play. In addition, almost all the advice for church leaders on how to cope with the pandemic would become completely irrelevant overnight.

Yet, whether a pandemic strikes or the internet breaks or the church is driven into hiding, not a single word of this book you are holding would become irrelevant. Its principles were relevant before we sat down to write them, they're relevant today, and we believe they will remain relevant in all circumstances until

Christ returns. The church may be closed on weekends, but the mission of Jesus is never boarded up. The internet could disappear, but the word of God would still sound to the ends of the earth (Ps. 19:4).

This book begins by displaying the problem the church is mired in, but it ends by revealing the wonder of the mission that Christ has called us to. Our reason for journeying is to see the restoration of a body as

old as the apostles and as new as tomorrow, whatever tomorrow holds. Welcome to Future Church.

The church may
be closed on
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PART 1

FAKING DISCIPLES

THE UNCOMFORTABLE REALITY OF
LOWER ROOM LEADERSHIP

TWO ROOMS

The Best Picture to Expose the North American Church's Greatest Challenge

One of my favorite things about being a ministry consultant is that I get to meet a lot of people with interests and hobbies I never would have imagined. In recent months I met a pastor who collects chess sets from across the world, a denominational leader who hunts wild boar with a knife, and a missionary who makes guitars out of cigar boxes.

In comparison, my hobbies are a bit more conventional. I like Mexican food, snowboarding, looking at real estate, and fishing for smallmouth bass on a flowing river. But if I have a quirky hobby, it's this: I love useful tools that show important ideas *through pictures*.

Okay, I know that makes me kind of a nerd. But I love pictures; I can't get enough of them. I am an avid Instagrammer. My favorite part of writing a blog post might be picking the stock photos to go with it. I *do* judge a book by its cover (at first), and when I get a new book, the first thing I do is flip through to find the pictures. I am a super visual person, and I enjoy helping others engage the power of visual thinking.

So, as a consultant and author, I am known as a toolmaker—not the kind of tool you hang on a pegboard in your garage but the

kind you draw on the whiteboard in your office. I enjoy creating visual presentations of important ideas to create new perspective, deeper understanding, and ultimately permanent breakthrough. I have been doing this for twenty years and have made many tools that I love sharing with people in my books. But the visual tool I made that has done the most good for the most leaders over two decades of consulting has never been seen in print—until now.

The Four Most Common Reasons People Attach to a Church

The picture-tool begins with a question: *Why do people call your church “home”?* Phrased another way, *What connects people emotionally to your church?* If you could roll a soul X-ray machine in front of a person to see the real answer to that question, what would light up in their heart? I have found that most people in most churches answer with a combination of the following four attachments.

1. Place

Some people are emotionally tied to the church’s physical structure because of its convenient location, its architectural beauty, or their personal investment in dollars and sweat to keep it in good shape over the years. To them, in a real way, the facility is the church. Whether it’s a hip industrial campus downtown, a fabulous strip mall renovation, a suburban big box that would make AMC envious, or a beautiful steeple with a dash of stained glass in the rural countryside, we make our places and then our places make us. If you want to know how strong *place* is as a connection dynamic, just mention relocation in the next church business meeting.

A film roll of stories spins through my mind when I think of the role of place. One church in Amarillo, Texas, had so many donated-by signs on church fixtures that even the air conditioner condenser

unit in the backyard had a plaque on it. I thought to myself, “This church can’t even upgrade its A/C without offending someone!”

Perhaps the most dramatic personal experience with place for me came when the Willowdale Chapel near Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, called Auxano about ten years ago. The leadership at that time reached out for my help without realizing that it was my home church when I was in high school. I was going back to consult the church where I attended youth group and preached my first sermon. The most wonderful part of my first day back on the property came not when I took in the impressive worship center that had been built to accommodate growth since my day. It was when I walked into the dingy, cinder-block Sunday school rooms in the basement of the original chapel. A flood of memories came back with the familiar sights and smells of those small classrooms. I was instantly reminded of spiritual breakthroughs and meaningful relationships. At that moment I would have fiercely resisted any suggested changes to the basement because of my sentimental connection alone.

2. Personality

Some people are emotionally connected to a particular leader because of their amazing skill as a communicator, wisdom as a Bible teacher, or compassion in the ups and downs of life. To these people, the leader is the church. If you want to know how strong *personality* is, imagine how attendance would be impacted if your senior pastor suddenly announced he was leaving for a year, and that a guest preacher would be speaking the next fifty-two weeks.

One dramatic illustration of this is a stellar leader who planted a church in a midsized Midwestern city. After twenty years of leadership, the fruit of his ministry was significant. For several years his church even registered on *Outreach*’s list of the one hundred fastest-growing churches. While we were traveling together, he confided in me that he had been diagnosed with Parkinson’s

disease. Several months later, still before the disease had made any noticeable impact on his physical presence, he announced his condition to the congregation. Within four months the church's average worship attendance dropped by over ten percent. The elders wrestled with what the root cause of the decline might be. They finally concluded, "People like a winner. And evidently you can't be winning if you have Parkinson's."

No matter how you slice it, people in a church are deeply connected to the staff of the church. Even when a relatively ineffective pastor leaves a church of any size, there are always a handful of folks who check out.

Before moving on, it is worthwhile to pause and look at place and personality in light of church history. These two Ps are essential to Church As We Know It, but they are incidental to real church growth. From AD 100 to 300, the Christian movement spread like wildfire despite hostile conditions. While we cannot know the numbers for sure, we know that it grew in order of magnitude from thousands of believers to millions of them. Rodney Stark conservatively estimates that in AD 300 there were six million believers who made up 10 percent of the population. Alan Hirsch observes that in this two-hundred-year stretch, there were no such things as dedicated church buildings (place) or professional clergy (personality). The persecuted church became a force in the world without the supposed advantages that we take for granted as necessities today.¹

3. Programs

Some people are emotionally tied to the various activities and ways of doing things at church. This may be their favorite way of doing the Tuesday morning women's Bible study, their affection for home groups, missional communities, AWANA, kids' church, men's prayer breakfast, or how we make decisions as an elder board. To these people, the activities are the church. If you want to

test someone's connection to a *program*, just mention that church leadership is considering upgrading their favorite one with a newer one.

Early in my consulting career I learned the power of emotional connection to program. I helped a church in Virginia launch a contemporary worship service. Everyone was on board that it needed to happen, but there was deep division about *when* it should happen. The old guard wanted to keep it an early service at the crack of dawn, but the pastor was ready to launch at prime time—the 11 a.m. slot. I came to a board meeting perfectly prepared with a sequence of questions to sell the eleven o'clock option.

In the room of a dozen leaders, I ended up engaging in dialogue with Deacon Jim with the full attention of the rest of the board. “Jim,” I asked with quiet confidence, “if we launch the contemporary service at eleven o'clock, you do know that more families with young kids will attend, right?”

“Yep,” he replied.

“And Jim,” I continued, “you do know that some of those families will not have a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, right?”

“Yep,” he repeated.

“And Jim,” I drove on, “you would gladly launch the contemporary service at the eleven o'clock time slot if you knew that an eight-year-old boy would find Jesus and a church home for the very first time, right?”

Jim didn't reply right away; instead, he looked reflectively into the distance. Then he finally spoke: “But I have been attending the traditional service since *I* was eight years old.”

My jaw dropped in disbelief. Eventually the church launched a fledgling contemporary service at 8:30 a.m.

4. People

Some people are emotionally connected to their friends at church, the *people* who create an atmosphere of acceptance and

first-name familiarity. It may be as simple as a fifteen-minute chat in the church entryway. Or it may be a solid, deep kinship in a long-running House Church. Or it may be somewhere in between like the warm connections amidst a yearlong weekday small group. For many, these interactions are the church. To measure the strength of this draw of people, imagine how a family may respond once they learn that their two best friends at church are relocating to another town. Would their connection to the church be threatened?

A funny feature of congregations is how people resist even small changes in worship service times. Let's say a church has two Sunday morning services at 9:30 and 11:00 a.m. As the church grows, an additional service time is required. Let's say the leadership decides to launch new service times at 9:00, 10:15, and 11:30 a.m. With additional service times you would think people would appreciate more options to suit their preference. But they don't. Church attenders resist the change because they resist the loss of the natural ebb and flow of friendships defined by the current schedule. Changing service times equates to "shuffling the relational deck" of the church. It might even boot you from your favorite auditorium seat or pew location with the invisible nameplate with your name etched on it.

I remind church leaders all the time that it's easier to find this kind of connection in a local bar than it is in a local church. It's a judgment-free zone where—cue the *Cheers* theme song—"everybody knows your name." All humans crave this whether they know it or not. And this sociological reality of life makes the world turn round whether a person is a believer or not. So when a person *does* find it at church, the last thing they want is to lose it.

At some point every effective disciple of Jesus must confront a natural tension. After a believer experiences salvation, the new saint will most likely experience some kind of biblical community, and many times it is downright wonderful. Yet, at some point, the believer will be confronted with the mission of Jesus, which presents a challenging question: "Is it more important to preserve the intimacy

of the fellowship or to unsettle that familiarity and warmth in order to add the next outsider?” To say it another way, “Will I intentionally walk away from the good vibes of my small group in order to multiply the group so that others may join?” To say it Jesus’s way, “Will I gladly leave the ninety-nine for the lost one?”

Generations of church experience testify to the challenge of the “us four and no more” Christian club. When people get their identity from friendships at church, they resist the proverbial open chair. As my friend Larry Osborne points out, most Christians are like LEGO blocks with all their connectors snapped together with other believers they already know.²

The Most Important Picture of Twenty Years of Consulting

Now that we have surveyed the four Ps, take a moment to picture the church as a two-story house. When people come into your church for the first time, what draws them in? When they decide to stick around the church, what moves them to make themselves at home? The answer to both is usually the four Ps of place, personality, programs, and people. Just as a person usually enters a house at ground level, people enter your church by walking into what I call the *Lower Room*, where the church’s four Ps are located.

When people engage with a church, they necessarily form opinions about the place, the personality, the programs, and the people. They cannot help but make or not make an immediate connection to all of the obvious things around them. These are the concrete things they can see and touch and will like or dislike. If someone talks about why they like a church, one of the four Ps usually takes center stage:

- **Place:** “The new building is close to where we live.”
- **Personality:** “Pastor Carlos is such a good teacher.”

- **Program:** “Emma and Aiden really love going to Kidz Zone.”
- **People:** “It’s the church our friends Joe and Sally attend.”

Because every person coming in contact with a church first encounters its Lower Room, every church should aspire to have attractive Lower Room features. I want to see a stellar Lower Room in every church I work with. I want them to have amazing facilities. I want the people to think the pastor hung the moon. I hope the programs are exciting and dynamic. And, of course, I want people to have great chemistry with friends they enjoy.

It follows that good church leaders pay close attention to the Lower Room. In fact, in order to grow the church, leaders spend much time making their four Ps more accessible from the outside and more irresistible on the inside. We upgrade our sanctuary like we upgrade our kitchen. We hire a young associate pastor to attract younger families. We roll out a new sermon series like a new season on Netflix. We attempt to make our guests feel as welcome as VIPs at Disney World.

Please note that in the lifetimes of today’s church leaders, this has been the tried and true formula for church growth: if you maximize the attractiveness of your place, the charisma of your personalities, the excellence of your programs, and the welcome of your people, your church will grow. It’s that simple.

At the same time, however, there remains a disturbing question lurking in the house’s shadow. Is capturing people in the Lower Room *real* church growth? Is this what Christ called us to do: tie people emotionally to a place, personalities, programs, and people? Does a church where most people are most attached to facility, leaders, activities, and relational chemistry correspond to what the church *is* according to the Bible?

Of course it’s not! Jesus gave *every* church a dynamic mission and *each* church one-of-a-kind potential. In addition, people prefer to be emotionally connected to a much bigger idea, a more transcendent cause. The life that Jesus offers to each of his disciples

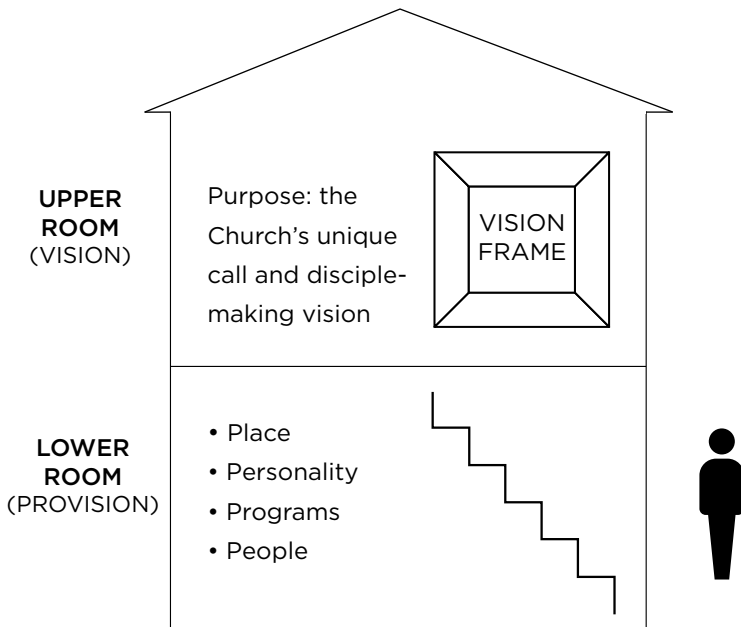
through this amazing thing called the local church can hardly be captured in *the Lower Room alone*.

We need another room. I call it the *Upper Room*, and it changes everything.

The Upper Room

The Upper Room offers an alternative answer to the question “Why do the people in your church call it ‘home’?” People in the Upper Room are emotionally attached to a sense of purpose beyond place, personalities, programs, and people. Being in the Upper Room means that a person knows and names *God’s unique disciple-making vision for a church*.

Figure 1 – Two Different Motivations for Church Attendees



People in the Upper Room not only like the vision but have fallen in love with it. Imagine a Jesus-following college girl excited about her new boyfriend. Picture her sharing with close friends all about his charming personality and commitment to God as she beams with a sense of attraction. Now imagine a church attender excited to share about her church in a similar way, talking up the specific dream of the church's gospel impact. People in the Upper Room call their church home because they are passionate about how God wants to use their church family as it gathers regularly and scatters daily. Most importantly, they have given themselves to this holy cause, wholly.

Let's evaluate the two rooms through a simple comparison. If you were to ask an eight-year-old boy what he wanted most for his life, every answer would be tangible: an electric scooter, a PlayStation, et cetera. But if you were to ask the parents of the eight-year-old boy what they wanted most for their son, every answer would be intangible: a vital relationship with God, acceptance, confidence, and so on. We wouldn't really fault the boy for wanting the next best toy. But we would find the parents alarmingly myopic if not downright irresponsible if they aimed at a tangible thing. Why? Because it would completely miss the beauty and opportunity of being human. We might say the boy is emotionally connected to a Lower Room of life while his mature parents live in the Upper Room.

Here is another way to look at it: what quality do place, personalities, programs, and people have in common? *They change*. And not only do they change, but virtually every leader understands that they *must change* over time to ensure the viability of both the organization and its higher purpose. The building needs remodeling. The pastor retires. Programs get tired. People move away.

Think of this incredible advantage of the Upper Room: even when the place, personalities, programs, and people in the Lower Room change or fall away, the commitment of Upper Room people

does not waver. In fact, I have routinely seen the conversion of people who used to resist change now insisting on it. The secret is this: people don't resist change; they resist loss. (If you offer someone a 15 percent raise today, chances are they will not resist the change!) If people are emotionally connected to the Upper Room, they don't have anything to lose when the Lower Room changes. The four Ps do not compel them to claim the church as their own. Rather, Upper Room people truly identify with the church's Vision Frame—that is, its disciple-making mission and disciple-shaping values, worked out through its disciple-moving strategy toward disciple-defining measures of success in light of its disciple-inspiring vision.

**People don't
resist change;
they resist loss.**

You will hear leaders in both the church and business world attest to this dynamic of change management. Andy Stanley teaches leaders to “marry your mission but only date your model” as he encourages them to adapt and update methodology.³ In his classic book *Built to Last*, Jim Collins uses a yin-yang symbol to contrast a leader's relationship to continuity and change.⁴ Organizations that endure must have an undying commitment to a core ideology on the one hand but a ruthless commitment to change everything else on the other. This ironically becomes the only way to stay true to your core. I put it this way when I talk to church leaders: the Upper Room is what you etch in marble, the Lower Room is what you write in the sand.

In the end, the supremacy of the Upper Room does not make the Lower Room a bad place, but it does put it in its place. The four Ps of the Lower Room are useful to bring people into an environment that supports disciples of Jesus, but disciples are not supposed to remain there. They do not truly become friends of Jesus who do what he commands (John 15:14) unless they ascend from the Lower Room to the Upper Room. The Lower Room is meant to draw people in, but the Upper Room is meant to draw

people up. The Lower Room is the *provision* of the church, but the Upper Room must be the vision. The Lower Room can and will change; the Upper Room is enduring.

We can easily see both rooms in Jesus's ministry. When he feeds the five thousand men (a crowd that could have been up to twenty thousand men, women, and children), we see Jesus providing compelling teaching and miracle bread to the masses. It's a Lower Room environment. The Gospel of John testifies that people came primarily motivated by the benefits Jesus provided, which included a free Happy Meal for the kids. But at the end of Jesus's ministry, how many disciples are gathered who have signed their pledge card with ink not pencil? One window to this number is the 120 in the literal upper room recorded in Acts 1:15; another possibility is the five hundred Jesus appeared to at one time after the resurrection, according to Paul (1 Cor. 15:6). If you were to have asked Jesus, "How big is your church?" how would he have answered? I probably would have

If you were to
have asked
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have answered?

leaned toward the five-digit attendance figure, especially if I was reporting to my denomination. I think Jesus would have reported 120.

Unfortunately, in many churches, including in churches that appear to be thriving, few people dwell in the Upper Room. When someone tells me they lead a big church, I immediately wonder which room they are talking about. I tend to see

the attendance on weekends as the size of the Lower Room; it is the size of the immediate ministry opportunity, not the size of the church. The true size of the church is the Upper Room. I would rather lead an Upper Room church of 120 than a Lower Room church of 1,200. The first is a force in the community. The other is an event in the building.

Confessions of a Consultant

In 2001, I started consulting with churches full time and eventually launched an organization called Auxano. At that time I introduced a new process for helping each church articulate its unique disciple-making mission and model revolving around the concept of vision. Since then I founded the Future Church Company, comprising Younique, which delivers gospel-centered life planning to individual disciples; Denominee, which helps networks, multichurches, and denominations bring value to congregations; and Pivvot, which brings the principles of *Future Church* to the local church.

When I began helping churches overcome barriers to growth, I was thinking about more than merely accumulating attenders. Rather, I was thinking about real church growth born from the Word's effect on the human heart and developed through the pattern of disciple-making disciples—men and women who value, practice, and model new skills in living the way of Jesus.

For two decades my primary work has been to help each church assess, articulate, and advance how God has shaped it to make disciples according to its unique context, its one-of-a-kind congregational makeup, and the particular callings of its leaders. I call it Vision Framing. The goal in building a Vision Frame with a church team has nothing to do with an event-based retreat to articulate a new mission, vision, and values. Rather, it involves a disruptive and challenging process where the team rethinks its existence at a core level and remakes its church operating system from the ground up. My calling is all about applying essence; a Vision Framing process penetrates to the essence of a local church and pushes it through to application. Vision Framing isn't complete until the empowered local leadership can articulate with convictional clarity how they will live out their own disciple-making model *in their time* with a specific dream for dramatic gospel good *in their place*.

The Vision Frame answers five irreducible questions of clarity. These answers become the codified vocabulary that defines

the Upper Room. First, this makes it accessible to people; vision transfers through people not paper. Second, it enables the church to reevaluate, realign, repurpose, replace, remove, or renovate the Lower Room stuff in order to promote and propel the Upper Room vision.

For as long as I and many others have been leading church teams through Vision Framing, we've never faced a lack of interest. The demand for our tools testifies to the church's hunger to make the main thing the main thing. Churches understand what it means to have no growth or fake growth; every church I have worked with wants real growth by making disciples of Jesus.

Yet I have a confession to make: some of our work has contributed more to the illusion of fluency in disciple making than it has to the real thing. If I could have seen this clearly as it was happening, I would have called it out. But in real time, my hopefulness overpromised on what my helpfulness delivered. With rearview mirror visibility on a twenty-year report card, I would sort my clients into three buckets: a leading third that soared in fulfilling the mission of Jesus, a middle third that demonstrably picked up the pace, and a lagging third that only messaged the mission—all talk, no do.

I now see that although no church—large or small, traditional or contemporary, Baptist or Presbyterian, mainline or new start—disagrees with Jesus's mandate for his church to make disciples, many fundamentally fail to do so *even while they become more adept at articulating disciple-making outcomes as their core reason for being.*

Words Create Worlds

I love the phrase “words create worlds,” attributed to Abraham Joshua Heschel. That mantra expresses the conviction I bring to churches to help them name what they can do best as communities of disciple-making disciples. I am an idea architect and words

are construction material. I often teach that the secret to getting people in the Upper Room is building a staircase, one that is not made of wood but of words—the shared, codified vocabulary of the Upper Room. Words are the leader’s primary tool, after all. If we can just say it well, say it together, say it often, and say it with feeling, surely people will catch the vision; surely they will taste and see the biggest ideas of God!

This is my conviction, and I have found it to be the strength of my ministry. It works. But there is a weakness in overrelying on the technology of getting words right. Yes, words create worlds. Yes, the pen is mightier than the sword. But it’s also true that talk is cheap.

I now understand more clearly how a church that is not making disciples can walk through an intensive Vision Framing process and come out the other side a spiffier-sounding church still not making disciples. Even when a church’s disciple-making language improves, the Upper Room remains inaccessible.

I do not believe the Vision Frame has been fatally flawed; not only myself but also the consultants, denominational leaders, and pastors I’ve trained and certified have seen tremendous fruit. Yet I do believe that, as every reflective person and organization eventually discovers, our greatest strength carries with it our greatest weakness. In our case, we have helped people appreciate and even personalize the disciple-making *words* of Jesus, but that has not automatically propelled them into the disciple-making *works* of Jesus.

The bottom line is that I underestimated the power of the Lower Room. Its gravitational pull is not the tug of a minor moon but the force field of a black hole. Our consulting work is extensive, but it has not always broken through to the church’s essence. When I thought I was installing a new operating system, some churches were merely installing a new app only to abandon it for the next silver-bullet app a year later.

The Seven Laws of the Upper Room as Visionary Planning Prequel

In my first clarity book, *Church Unique*, I unpacked the problem of photocopied ministry, and I unveiled the process of articulating a Vision Frame that enables church leaders to answer the five irreducible questions of organized disciple making for their unique congregation. The Vision Frame is an operating system designed to help leaders shape their church's culture and guide their church's growth. It helps a pastor lead from a unique disciple-making mission and model.

In my second clarity book, *God Dreams*, I showed church leaders how to discern and develop a long-range vision for their church and then install a simple execution plan to achieve it. Built on the Vision Frame, *God Dreams* features the Horizon Storyline (also known as the "1:4:1:4"), a tool that expands and deepens a church's answer to the fifth irreducible question, "Where is God taking us?" These books are volumes one and two of a visionary planning methodology used by churches of every faith tribe (see the appendix).⁵

When a Vision Framing process is done well, the end result is always one of a kind. This is what I live for. In all my years as a consultant, I have been Mr. Uniqueness. I have never lost my abiding passion to see each church (and, through my organization Younique, each individual believer) live out its special calling from God, to do what ten thousand other churches could never do. I urge churches not to short-circuit God's missional potential by cutting and pasting someone else's playbook. I designed the Vision Frame as the tool to help leaders know and name the beautiful, one-of-a-kind features of its Upper Room.

Yet I now see that all the work that goes into furnishing the Upper Room makes little difference if leaders are not acquainted with the Upper Room itself. If well-intentioned leaders are locked in a Lower Room mindset, all the great words they craft do not

take people upstairs; they keep everyone, including themselves, circulating on the ground floor. They use more vivid, purpose-filled language to keep drawing people into the Lower Room, and they overlay Upper Room expectations onto Lower Room actions.

Consequently, before I walk a church team through the five irreducible questions of organized disciple making—the Vision Frame—it is not safe to assume that we all share the same convictions about disciple making that the Vision Frame is founded on. That means I have to introduce leaders to the Upper Room so that they commit to it themselves before I help them bring the rest of their church upstairs. So, when I walk into a church today, I no longer start with the five questions but with seven laws.

That's what *Future Church* is all about. *Future Church* is my first book on the church's general calling—the disciple-making principles that ought to characterize every church. This book does not describe a boilerplate ministry model to be imposed on every church. Rather, it describes the fundamentals that every church must hold and operationalize if its own unique model would take people where God yearns for them to go.

Think of *Future Church* as the prequel to *Church Unique* and *God Dreams*—the episode released later in the series that tells how the whole saga begins. I wish every pastor, church leader, and ministry I have ever served as a consultant could have read it before we started working together.

This is even truer today, because every church and leader in North America is at a crossroads. Over the next twenty years, each church will increasingly resemble one of three types. Which one yours becomes has everything to do with its Upper Room, its Lower Room, and where people's greater attachment lies.

THREE CHURCHES

The Most Useful Typology for the Next Twenty Years

The first day of my professional ministry career was also one of the worst. It happened at Clear Creek Community Church in February of 1998.

It was a Tuesday afternoon, and I finally got in touch with Dan, the lay leader responsible for our children's ministry team. It was an important call because that Thursday night we were having our weekly program team meeting and run-through. The church had recently moved from age-graded classrooms to a so-called kids' church philosophy; that made the Thursday meeting even more essential, because we were designing a full-blown worship service with homemade creative programming every week.

Obviously, that was a big job, but that's what attracted me to my new position. Bruce Wesley, the founding pastor, had recruited me as a potential church planter. He sold me on the idea that developing a children's ministry would be like planting a church within a church before I planted outside the church.

As I got to know Dan on the phone that day, I was increasingly excited that I could now step into a leadership role that would relieve some of his burden. I even remember thinking how fortunate

the children's ministry was now to have a full-time pastor and trained seminarian at the helm. I was a bit unclear on the details of how the handoff would be made, but before it could happen Dan said something that shook me to the core. As the conversation was winding down, he did the unthinkable: he invited me to sit in on Thursday night's program team meeting *if I wanted to*.

If I wanted to? Are you kidding me? What was he thinking? He was the amateur, and it was clearly time for him to step aside, for me, the professional. I sat for one hour paralyzed at my desk. I thought to myself, "What in the world have I gotten myself into?" Then I thought, "How could I have accepted this assignment that would never utilize my special knowledge of Greek and my refined preaching skills?" Dan's invitation scandalized my professional ministry sensibility.

By God's grace, the Holy Spirit gave me a flash of hope that day. If I wasn't going to lead the program directly, I would have to do it indirectly. But what did that mean practically? The Holy Spirit woke me up to the fact that my job was not to lead a program but a person. The only clue to keep me going was an idea that rang like a bell in my mind: *my job is to lead the program by having lunch with Dan*. I didn't know if I could succeed, but I was willing to give it a try. No one had given me a playbook for it, but maybe I could figure it out.

I credit Bruce Wesley, Dan, and the whole leadership community of Clear Creek for modeling a healthier church culture than seminary had prepared me for. I was trained to be the hero, the one managing the show from center stage. Bruce hired me to be a hero maker, the one developing people for meaningful contribution. I came to Clear Creek to make my ministry dreams come true. But the people of Clear Creek were trying to make Jesus's dreams come true.

I would not appreciate the value of this awakening until years later. What happened that day shaped my paradigm of church ministry. I had experienced dynamic disciple-making relationships

for over a decade in my late teens and early twenties. During those years disciple-making relationships were always more important than the programs that I attended. Relationship was always the main thing, and programs were just an excuse for the main thing to happen.

But at the onset of my first pastoral assignment I was tempted to make the program the main thing. The conversation with Dan was a blessed whiplash back to what I already knew. From day one as a local church pastor, God converted me to see people development, not program management, as job one. I wanted my life to equip the saints for ministry when my new title threatened to excuse them from ministry.

One expression of this paradigm shift was how I later designed small groups when I became Clear Creek's pastor of spiritual formation. At the time, we ran home-based small groups as our primary disciple-making vehicle. Yet in every training we reinforced the idea that groups existed to facilitate more intimate groups of three or four that focused on five practices of devotion to Christ. Every group leader training guide had three file tabs for them to write in the names of three people that they were investing in more deeply. A successful group meeting was not an end in itself but a step toward more important outcomes that could only happen in nonprogrammed relationships.

Dallas Willard articulated the point simply and concisely: "Spiritual formation doesn't happen in a program at the church. It happens by living your life. We really need to stay away from creating programs as our goal. Programs have their place, but they must be subordinated to the spiritual life."¹ Ray Ortlund echoes him: "We're not here to generate programs. It can be kind of self-validating and have an appearance of self-importance. Busyness

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can be equated with importance, but that's just not the way things go in the kingdom of God.”²

Every Pastor's Daily Decision

My backstory reveals an important fork in the road of my vocational ministry journey. To this day I feel a great sense of susceptibility and vulnerability when I reflect on it. Beneath my conscious awareness I had two very different ministry paradigms before me. The automatic pilot of my internal navigation was directing me down the less biblical path of the program professional. I was on the verge of betraying all the best lessons I had learned from my previous ministry experience while I was still an amateur. I'm still amazed that I needed a minicrisis on my first day of postseminary, full-time ministry to jolt me onto a different path. I tremble a little when I wonder what would have happened to me if Dan *had* stepped aside to let me manage the children's ministry directly.

Fifteen years later, from a much different vantage point, I got a powerful glimpse of what I might have become. It was one of the most emotional moments of group facilitation I have ever led. I had the privilege of working with a group of pastors who were a part of a “leading edge” group of the one hundred largest United Methodist churches in the country. A bishop asked me to facilitate a learning group with twelve of these pastors in his annual conference. In our third session, there was no dry eye in the house even though these were all alpha male, senior pastor types.

What started the chain reaction of unexpected tears? The pastors grieved what they had lost in their success. One after the other, each pastor reflected on his call to ministry and his desire to make a difference through relational discipleship. Then each one painted the contrast between his early intention and his current role description at the helm of a booming church. They all

found themselves managing ministry machinery they had never really signed up for.

Here's the real tragedy: in that soul-full afternoon we reflected, we shared stories, and we found a deep moment of true comfort together. But after a little weeping, each one went right back to his busy church schedule.

That could have been me. The crisis of Dan's phone call years earlier was a gift from God. It was a warning shot across the bow of my ministry ship. Would I devote my time, effort, and energy to the narrow way of relational disciple making or to the wide road of program management?

Maybe you have faced a similar fork in the road yourself. It's an investment decision and a directional decision that every pastor must make every day.

These experiences help us appreciate the personal dimension of the three kinds of churches we will explore in this chapter and through the rest of this book. To suggest that your church fits 100 percent into one of three molds may seem unfair and even polarizing. I understand that. But the longer and harder you look at the church across North America, the more these three churches emerge, and they will only become more clearly visible over the next twenty years.

The Three Kinds of Churches

We can see the three kinds of churches through the lens of the Upper Room–Lower Room paradigm. The picture-tool delivers value at three angles of view. At the narrowest angle, it helps you interpret your own ministry journey. A bit wider, it helps your local church to make disciples effectively. And at the widest angle it helps you understand the present moment and where the church at large is headed.

After twenty years of consulting, I am convinced that we are entering a twenty-year window that will witness the transformation

of the church in North America. There is a vast and still multiplying number of ways to describe the church in our place and day, but I maintain that the best way to classify it over the next two decades is with this threefold formulation.

Type #1: Program Church—Organization without Disciple Making

In the first kind of church, leaders conceive of church growth and discipleship solely in terms of the Lower Room. This church is big on organization but small on genuine, biblical disciple making. This is Church As We Know It; I call it *Program Church*.

I am not declaring that programs are bad in and of themselves or suggesting that the church should not have programs. I am simply naming the reality where attention on programs has become such a strong operational focus that a vision for and a culture of disciple making are eclipsed. Robust relational development is lost, because the programs have become an end in themselves.

My friend and longtime church consultant George Bullard has his own clever picture-tool to portray the problem of Program Church. George says that every church has four basic elements: *vision, relationships, programs, and management*. He sketches these as four people riding in an SUV (with a cross as the hood ornament).

In the healthiest, biblically functioning church, Vision is in the driver's seat, and Relationships sits in the front passenger position helping to navigate. Vision is George's way of talking about the Upper Room; Relationships represents the church's culture and practice of making disciples. Meanwhile, Programs sits in the back seat behind Relationships to support it, and Management rides behind Vision to help it drive.

In George's terms, Program Church emerges when Vision gets tired of driving and needs to take a nap in the back seat. When Vision pulls the car over, Management eagerly volunteers to drive. But Management wants his seatmate Programs to navigate, so

Relationships heads to the back seat too. The result is the unhealthiest seating arrangement in a church: Management driving, Programs navigating, and Vision and Relationships fast asleep in the back seat. Worst of all, no matter how tired Management gets, he hates giving up the driver's seat, and he demands that Programs keep sitting next to him! Even when Vision wakes up, it takes a huge effort to pry Management's fingers off the wheel.³

That is Program Church in theory, but what does it look like in real-life terms? Look around and you will find thirty-one Baskin-Robbins varieties of it. It is everywhere, whether your preference is traditional vanilla or the latest and greatest version of rocky road. Church leaders of every stripe have mastered Program Church. What makes Program Church isn't the style of the worship services or the presence or absence of a steeple. It's the attention of the leadership: in Program Church over 80 percent of the pastoral staff's energy is focused on running weekend worship and supporting events.

Many Program Church pastors feel uneasy about it the same way the previously mentioned Methodist pastors did. But just like those pastors, many have apparently succeeded with it. As I will recount in later chapters, Program Church quite simply worked for many years. People showed up; money rolled in. In many congregations, Program Church was so evidently successful that it seemed like madness to disrupt it. Attendance was booming and small groups were proliferating; surely the Lord's work was being done. Why rock the boat?

But all the while something was missing, and in their spirits many pastors and other attenders could sense it. Now, however, more people are noticing Program Church's increasingly obvious impotence.

In Program Church over 80 percent of the pastoral staff's energy is focused on running weekend worship and supporting events.

From 2015 to 2020 the most gifted and talented leaders in every faith tribe—even those hailed as successful according to prevailing opinion—experienced the crisis of attendance frequency decline. Put another way, not even the most “excellent” and “relevant” programming (to quote the era’s buzzwords) has stopped regular attenders from attending less frequently. That doesn’t even count the landslide of the nonreligious in emerging generations who are not attending anywhere at all. (There are most certainly exceptions to the rule of attendance decline, which I will address in later chapters. For now, suffice it to say that I question whether their growth has been generated from disciple-making gusto rather than celebrity magnetism and staged spectacle.)

But the current crisis may also be an opportunity. It is becoming increasingly difficult for Program Church to validate itself by touting consistent worship attendance and sustainable budgeting. Coasting along is no longer an option—the time is up. In the hearts of many, from leaders to attenders, holy discontent has awoken. People are hungering and thirsting for a better way to do church than the Lower Room.

Type #2: House Church—Disciple Making without Organization

The second kind of church rejects the Lower Room altogether and endeavors to operate solely from the Upper Room. Proponents of this form of church believe (at least implicitly) that Church As We Know It is irredeemable—that it is so distorted by generations of disciple faking, which has warped the demands of attenders and bent the assumptions of leaders, that it is impractical or even impossible to fix it from the inside. This church exists as unincorporated relational networks meeting in relatively small groups in homes and public spaces. It is small on organization but big on disciple making, and it is commonly known as *House Church*.

House Church is also known as “microchurch,” “organic church,” or “simple church” (not to be confused with the book *Simple Church*, by Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger).⁴ Despite my label “House Church,” which some House Church practitioners dislike,⁵ this church may meet anywhere that people get together. The number of participants gathered in one place is small and relationships are intimate. Leadership is shared widely and is not professionalized. Yet these are also characteristics of a small group in Program Church. House Church is different because participants consider the group itself to be church, not a program of a church. It has no features of organized, institutional Christianity as we are familiar with it—that is, no Lower Room. More importantly, the church does not consist in its meeting but in its web of life-on-life, disciple-making relationships, and it is constantly looking to reproduce new simple churches. To adapt George Bullard’s analogy, House Church is a two-seat roadster with Vision driving and Relationships riding shotgun. It is all Upper Room.

I recently met Shawn, an ex-pastor of small groups who got so fed up with his role description that he resigned from his north Dallas-based megachurch with five thousand weekly attenders. He now does construction work for his income, but making disciples is his passion and continues to guide his calling. The day we talked, Shawn had been leading a House Church for about eighteen months and had twenty-six people in his family room for worship. With a vibrant glow, he celebrated with me how a handful of people had come to Christ in his neighborhood since he started meeting. What I appreciated most about Shawn was his joy. He wasn’t mad at the organizational expression of church; he just realized that he didn’t want to invest his life in that model any longer.

Brad, on the other hand, was a little less joyful as he pondered the frustration of organized church. A few years ago, this college buddy of mine moved to San Antonio and asked me to recommend some churches to him. Two years later, we got together for coffee. “How’s everything going at church?” I asked.

“Not good,” he replied, revealing his profound discouragement. “I love Jesus and I love his people,” he said, “but I am not sure if it’s worth going every Sunday to hear the talk and watch the gig.” The way he described his home-based small group gripped me the most. “It’s like we inject the church program into our home,” he said. “We talk about community, but that’s not what we experience. A few weeks ago, it came to a head for me when a couple in our group announced they were getting a divorce. We had been ‘doing life together’ for over a year, but no one in our group had a clue what was going on.” He reported it all with a look of bewildered disbelief.

Six months ago, Brad broke out of the organized expression of church for the first time since he became a deeply committed Jesus follower. When I asked what he named the new group he started, he smirked: “G.O.P.G.—Group of People Gathered.” You could hear the disdain in his voice for anything too official sounding.

These two House Church cameos represent a broad movement that I will not be discussing in this book. I want to clarify that while I am not a House Church practitioner myself, I do have a great respect for those who are. From living room chats with my friend Neil Cole to vigorous conversations with Frank Viola, I have rubbed shoulders with simple church thought leaders over the years. (If you are interested in learning more about making an intentional journey into missional communities, I recommend the resources and coaching of Alex Absalom, who with his wife, Hannah, leads Dandelion Resourcing, which equips churches to develop missional disciple-making cultures.)

Before leaving the topic of House Church, it is important to note that this is not a fad or something that is insignificant right now but might happen down the road. A 2009 study by the Barna Group revealed that anywhere from 4 to 33 percent of American adults claimed they had attended a House Church in the past month—the reason for the wide variance being the different ways the question was asked. Nevertheless, fully 10 percent of respondents said they had “attended a worship service in someone’s home, known as a

house church” within the past month.⁶ Church leaders who don’t get a steady diet of simple church content may not be aware of how prominent the movement is. It is fairly invisible compared to the industry of the organized church, but it is not going away.

Type #3: Future Church—Organized Disciple Making

By contrast with both Program Church and House Church, the third kind of church operates with both a Lower Room and an Upper Room. It maintains the place, personalities, programs, and people of the Lower Room, and it strives to make them accessible and excellent. Yet it entirely subordinates the Lower Room to the Upper Room’s disciple-making vision; in other words, the institutional church serves relational disciple making as Jesus modeled, taught, and commanded. This church does not choose between organization and disciple making; it practices “organized disciple making.” I call it *Future Church*.

Leaders in Future Church follow the practical strategy Dallas Willard proposed to the institutional church almost a quarter century ago: “We are, of course, *not* talking about eliminating nondisciple, consumer Christianity. . . . But we are talking about making it secondary, as far as our intentions are concerned. We would intend to make disciples and let converts ‘happen,’ rather than intending to make converts and letting disciples ‘happen.’”⁷

A more recent voice describing Future Church is Brian Sanders. His exodus from Program Church was marked by the passion and longing of my House Church friends Shawn and Brad:

When I first started talking about “leaving the church” . . . I argued it was the structures that needed to be left behind in order to build something better, something closer to our convictions. . . . I never told anyone to leave the church; I told people to leave the structures and programs that masquerade as church. I told people to leave the church of their deep frustration in order to take their place in the true and enduring church.

Yet as Sanders lays out his process of rethinking church and eventually launching The UNDERGROUND in the Tampa Bay area, he describes what I have always wanted church leaders to gain through the Vision Framing process. Sanders's new kind of church did not leave organization altogether but rather reinvented it:

The UNDERGROUND started with no obligations and no expectations other than orthodoxy and our integrity. We ended up with something more similar to traditional church than I ever would have imagined. We take offerings, sing songs, gather on Sundays, preach sermons, ordain elders, and meet in a building. But to us, these elements are different because of how we use them, and now that we've worked through each of them for ourselves, we own them. We came to decisions about these practices as free people. We carry these traditions forward because we have come to see that God is in them, not because of what was done before or will be done again. We have taken the church to pieces and, little by little, have rebuilt a form that we love.⁸

This is the sort of church that I am advocating for. I want to clarify early on, however, that I am not making a statement against House Church even though I believe that Future Church is the greater opportunity for the local church in North America over the next twenty years. The term "Future Church" is not meant as a critique of House Church, because I am sincerely excited that the House Church is flourishing. Rather, Future Church is a counterposition against Program Church to show it for what it is: a counterfeit of the real thing.

I also do not employ the term "Future Church" to claim that organized disciple making is a new thing. Quite the opposite: for two thousand years, every church and movement with a public presence that has made genuine, multiplying disciples through the gospel has been Future Church. Rather, I name this model Future

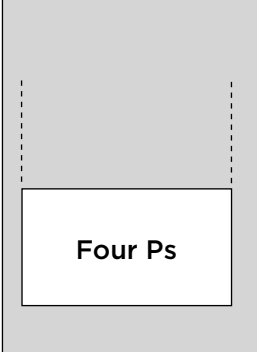
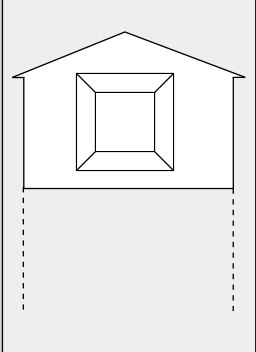
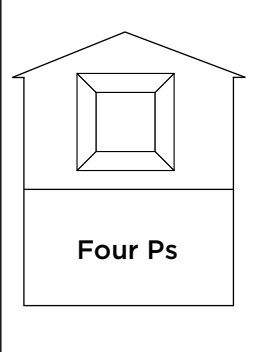
Church as a proclamation of hope for the organized church for the next twenty years.

Bringing Batman Back to the Church

The bulk of this book is devoted to describing Future Church, where both the Upper Room and the Lower Room are going strong, so I will not detail it further quite yet. Instead, I want you to feel the angst and the energy of young church leaders who are passionately longing for something more.

It has been a long time in coming. The last twenty years we have witnessed a missional reorientation that has at last reached a generational tipping point in church leadership. As I will describe

Figure 2 - Three Kinds of Churches

PROGRAM CHURCH	HOUSE CHURCH	FUTURE CHURCH
organization without disciple- making	disciple- making without organization	organized disciple- making
		

later in this book, the missional paradigm and the expectation of disciple making that began to be introduced around the year 2000 have finally begun changing the priorities of leaders at every life stage. But the zeal for missional disciple making is especially strong among younger ones (ages twenty-one to thirty-five) who are spearheading it in action today with new, deep conviction.

I have two sons in their twenties, both of whom are in full-time church leadership. Our conversations keep me bracingly aware of how ministry looks from the point of view of a young leader. One of them told me about his friend and colleague Braden, and I couldn't stop thinking about something specific he said.

"All day long as I'm working at my church, I feel like Bruce Wayne," Braden said. "That's the person the rest of the staff and the church people see. Then a few nights a week I spend time talking about Jesus with unbelieving friends where we hang out, and I get to be Batman. Some of these guys are coming to Christ and I'm discipling them, but it is totally disconnected from what I do in ministry for a paycheck.

"I don't want to be two people anymore," Braden continued. "I want to be Batman all the time—even in my church."

This is the heart cry of a generation. Like every reader of this book, they heard a call from God and have given their lives to serve him. But they can't abide doing it in Program Church anymore, and increasingly they won't. So the question facing all church leaders is this: what does it take to allow Batman—Braden, yes, but also you—to come into the light?

The only way is for leaders to discover the Upper Room, climb up, and start living and leading from it. You might be raring to go already. But before we can explore the Upper Room's dimensions, we have to uncover the forces that keep leaders stuck in the Lower Room. Paraphrasing Alvin Toffler, we have to unlearn before we can relearn.⁹ For until we deliberately decode and unlearn the ways of Program Church, we are doomed to scramble fruitlessly to maintain it.

OFF MISSION

What Keeps Leaders Serving a Functional Mission That's Not the Great Commission

At some time or another, someone commissioned you into ministry. You might recall your graduation from Bible college or seminary, an installation ceremony at your first church, your ordination, or maybe just the handshake that said, “You have the job.”

The commission you received probably echoed Scripture. Someone might have said, “Preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2). Maybe someone said, “Be strong and courageous” (Josh. 1:9). Very likely someone quoted the Great Commission—“go and make disciples” (Matt. 28:19)—but even if not, it was probably in the atmosphere. In any case, at the outset you likely heard something that articulated a clear if open-ended mission.

Then you got into your actual job, and one of the most difficult things about it was knowing whether or not you were succeeding in that commission you received. Amid the blizzard of responsibilities and occasional cloudbursts of criticism, how did you know you were getting anywhere? What scorecard could you look at to know you were succeeding? How could you know you were getting results?

Two Kinds of Results

One of our challenges when we start out in ministry is grappling with a job where results aren't obvious. Yet when we gain more experience, the trouble is recognizing different kinds of results for what they are. Not all ministry results tell the same story or have the same value.

I articulated this concept in my book *Innovating Discipleship*, where I compared *input results* with *output results*.¹ At first those terms may be a little confusing, because the term “input results” might sound self-contradictory (like a square circle) and “output results” might sound redundant. But there is an important reality lying behind these terms.

Church leaders conventionally measure worship attendance and giving, commonly styled “nickels and noses,” “butts and bucks,” and “Attendance, Buildings, and Cash (the ABCs).” Leaders generally consider numbers of people and amounts of money to be outcomes of ministry activity; in other words, the bodies and the money that came in today are the result of what we did yesterday.

There is truth to this view, but it is also misleading. People and money are properly outcomes only if the goal is to get more people to show up and more money to come in. But this is not the goal of the Great Commission. Jesus never said, “Go into all the world and get people to show up—and if you have a healthy bottom line, I’ll be pleased with that too.” The actual Great Commission is to make disciples. If disciple making is our task, then people and money are not outcomes but *inputs*.

Inputs are the things that churches put into the front end of the ministry machine. People who come into contact with the church are the raw material (so to speak) for the disciple-making process; they are what the church has to work on. Money also goes in the front end; it is a catalytic ingredient added to the ministry process in the form of paid staff, curriculum, a building, and so forth. People and money, then, are input results.

So, if people and money are input results of a church's disciple-making process, what are its output results—what comes out the other end of the ministry machine? Put another way, all the activity of the church ultimately produces . . . what?

This is a question that most leaders never ask, much less answer, despite its enormous importance. Each church should look at itself to see what its activity is actually producing. What God wants it to produce is named most succinctly by Paul in Colossians 1:28—to present every person “complete in Christ” (NASB).

We can break that imposing output result down further, however. For example, a church could define its intended output results as the triad of faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13) or the ninefold fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) or the eight Beatitudes of Jesus (Matt. 5:3–10). We could even scour the Bible for descriptions of Christlikeness and build a custom list. In fact, I routinely encourage churches to do this very thing in order to express the measures of Christlikeness in a way that fits their particular context.

Even so, such a list of discipleship outputs is still too lofty and abstract. Abstract qualities like joy and purity of heart always retreat in leaders' minds before the concrete measurables of attendance and cash. The trick is to convert spiritual qualities into marks that a person can more easily observe.

For example, one attribute of perfection in Christ is genuine love for other believers. If we're operating according to the common functional Great Commission—“make more worship attenders, baptizing them in the name of small groups and teaching them to volunteer a few hours a month”—we would likely measure love for others by whether the person regularly attends a small group. But a better way to measure it is by whether the person has a 2 a.m. *friend*, a friend they could call at two o'clock in the morning with a problem and that friend would drop everything to help, and vice versa.

Is a 2 a.m. friend a perfect measure? No, but it is much better than mere participation. It encapsulates a genuine ministry

output, a real result of what our churches should be doing in people's lives as they are formed as disciples of Jesus who obey everything he commanded. It is the kind of thing you think about if your primary attachment is to the church's Upper Room.

Where your measure is, there will your heart be also.

This illustration is only an introduction to the topic of ministry measures, which is beyond the scope of this book. The point here is that what we measure is intimately entwined with the mission we are really about. *Where your measure is, there will your heart be also.*

Unfortunately, the hearts of church leaders are under enormous pressures to dwell on input results over output results. These input results threaten to entomb their hearts in the Lower Room.

Under Pressure from Input Results

Pressure #1: Input Results Are Visible and Countable

Paul wrote that “we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen” (2 Cor. 4:18) and that “we live by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). Yet that is not easy to do! Our human minds are built so that we cannot help but put weight on what we apprehend with our five senses, especially what we see. For this reason, input results are impossible to ignore.

When you walk into the worship space on Sunday, you cannot help but see and silently measure how full the room is with people. In fact, you don't just see it, you *feel* it. Sight combines with sound, touch, and even smell to give you a sense that there is a buzz in the air—or not. When it is present, it can be intoxicating; when it is missing, it can be depressing.

In addition, input results are the easiest thing to measure, and their numerical data is as crisp and clean as they come—blessedly black and white. It does not take a particle accelerator to count

heads; it does not take an electron microscope to read an account balance. While it may take intuition and expertise to interpret the data's meaning, it takes nothing but counting and adding to get the raw numbers.

Pressure #2: Input Results Are Legitimate Output Results in For-Profit Business

People and money—which ought to be considered input results in the church world—are output results in the business world. Increasing customers and revenue are goals that all businesses have in common. This business viewpoint strongly influences many churches.

Many of the lay leaders in churches—especially the ones with the most influence—are also leaders in the business world. They spend all day working to maximize customers and revenue, so it is entirely natural for them to bring that mindset with them as they drive through rush-hour traffic straight from the office to the church board meeting.

In addition, because people and money are indeed essential to keep any organization running, it is easy for them to serve as the low-hanging fruit of success, especially in times of fatigue or stress. When I was in college, I remember thinking sometimes, “It doesn’t matter how I spend my time, as long as my grades are good.” Even as a church consultant, during some trying times I’ve just been happy that the bills are getting paid. Likewise, it is common to have a shared, unspoken feeling in a church that whatever else might be going on, if people and money keep coming in, we’re “all good.”

Pressure #3: Input Results Are Symbols of Success

Attendance and giving are the practical standard for how proficient a leader is. In my work with Denominee, I routinely lead teams made up of pastors from very different sized churches. I was recently in a meeting with pastors leading churches of 50, 250, 550,

and 3,500—a rare group in Christian circles because larger-church pastors are usually unlikely to collaborate with pastors of smaller ones. The question commonly asked (or at least silently thought) when pastors get together—“What’s your weekend worship attendance?” or simply “How big is your church?”—isn’t just to get an idea of what another pastor’s ministry situation is like; it’s regularly the measuring stick of the pastor’s leadership ability and vocational success.

Worship attendance is still the most reliable way to be regarded as an elite performer in professional ministry.

This doesn’t just happen on a collegial level but on a national level. *Outreach Magazine* is famous for its lists of the one hundred largest and one hundred fastest-growing churches in America with the senior pastor meticulously noted in the description of each. To its credit, the magazine has recently added a list of one hundred reproducing churches. But we have yet to see a magazine publish a list of the one hundred most prayerful churches in America or the one hundred churches that have commis-

sioned the most full-time cross-cultural missionaries. In North America today, worship attendance is still the most reliable way to be regarded as an elite performer in professional ministry.

Pressure #4: Input Results Justify Higher Pay

Dave Rhodes, cofounder of Younique, notes that the wider the gap is between what an average church participant is competent to do and what the senior leader is competent to do, the more unique and special the leader appears. Then the more special the leader looks, the more money the leader might be able to make.

For example, if a leader is able to grip the attention of two thousand people with skilled communication, and none of those two thousand people is able to do the same, the leader demonstrates

high value to the church and has the potential to command a higher salary than they would otherwise. As a result, it is in the leader's personal financial interest to attract more people to their own stellar performance and persuade people to help keep it going.

But note that this is the opposite of how disciple making works. Jesus talked about training students to be like their teacher, and he promised that those who believed in him would do even greater things than he did (cf. Luke 6:40; John 14:12). Jesus's ironic ambition as the unique Son of God was to make himself as un-unique as possible. That ambition would cost him in today's church.

Whether a leader is influenced by love of money varies from person to person and is not the main issue. The point is that the paycheck, which is meant to free the pastor to do God's work, can also become a subtle, biweekly reinforcement and reward for being special, for doing things that other believers cannot, which is directly related to the number of people who show up to watch the leader do it.

Pressure #5: Input Results Maintain the Social Contract

In a voluntary society where no one is compelled by some authority or intense peer pressure to attend church, people go to a church because they like it. Consequently, every stable or growing church rests on an unspoken social contract between participants and leadership: participants expect the leaders to deliver the things they like, and leaders expect participants to keep participating.

There are probably some people in your church who like for you to challenge them from the Word of God to grow in Christ and provide practical training for them to do so. Yet there are probably also people in your church who like for you to provide a positive weekly experience of moving music and uplifting preaching, a fun and wholesome environment for their kids, perhaps a pleasant circle of just-close-enough friends, and maybe a vehicle for them

to do their hobby in a setting that looks like service. They secretly hope that even their minuscule commitments to church stuff will still register as good enough.

Now consider the temptation this poses for church leaders. Whether they know it or not, these participants want their spiritual success defined as mere attendance. *That is the very same definition of professional success that the pastor is pressured to adopt* for all the reasons we have outlined so far. So it is the easiest thing in the world for the pastor to set the bar low, because then everyone clears it, including him- or herself. Participants stick around and even more come, soothed by justification by attendance. Meanwhile, the pastor's leadership is applauded due to validation by numbers. Everybody wins.

Energy Follows Attention

With all these pressures and temptations bearing down on pastors, is it any wonder when input results become our fixation? Is it any surprise when we doggedly pursue ministry success in the Lower Room? It would be stranger if we did not. Yet the long-term consequences are devastating. In John S. Dickerson's searing words:

Whatever you focus on, that person or problem will get your energy. . . . We have been so attentive to numbers, among other things . . . that we have not focused on genuine relational discipleship. This is not because we think discipleship is unimportant. Any Christian leader will tell you it is . . . of undeniable, utmost importance. But examine the calendar, the weekly routine of us pastors and leaders, and you won't find much room for relational discipleship. . . . The "tyranny of the urgent" has overtaken us. The late-20th-century church model, in many applications, requires so much energy and attention that little to nothing is left for anything else, including discipleship.²

As Dave Rhodes observes, New Testament believers would never have conceived that a person could be a leader in the church without being held responsible to make disciples. But today, with all the Lower Room responsibilities that Program Church loads on leaders, it is not only possible but probable that your church's leaders, from the video person to the lead pastor, are not individually making disciples but rather hoping that somehow the team as a whole is getting it done.

Dickerson concludes that “the late-20th-century church model, in many applications, requires so much energy and attention that little to nothing is left for anything else, including discipleship.” His remark about “the late-20th-century church model” alludes to yet another pressure on leaders to labor at the functional Great Commission: the pressure of history. None of us emerged into ministry from nowhere; we were formed by generations of structures, assumptions, and teaching about what church growth is all about. Therefore, we cannot step forward into Future Church until we learn our past.

SIXTY YEARS

How Twentieth-Century Church Growth Influences Twenty-First-Century Leaders

When I started serving a church fresh out of seminary in the 1990s, I was attracted to the best church-for-the-unchurched models. But around the year 2000, not long before I began working with churches as a consultant, I started catching the currents and winds of an emerging gulf stream—new thinking about church and the mission of Jesus. Twenty years have passed since then, and we currently live in a time of unprecedented complexity regarding church methodology. For the first time in two decades, I believe we are ripe for another paradigm shift that is now in the making. In fact, *Future Church* means to reframe that shift.

My mentor Len Sweet was the first to model for me up close the reality that a great futurist will always be a great historian. He uses an analogy from golf: to hit the ball farther you need a deeper backswing. Similarly, a church consultant's work sometimes resembles that of an archaeologist. When I get to know a church, I dig through layers of ministry sediment consisting of programs, structures, and philosophies laid down by leaders and influences of earlier eras. What every church does today is the product of

the layers already laid down with contemporary ministry ideas sitting on top. Many older churches have as many as four ministry paradigms influencing today's activities despite the incoherence of the different philosophies.

As I have gotten to know the geological layers of North American church ministry, I have concluded that a church growth model becomes increasingly pervasive over twenty years before it peaks and begins to be overtaken by a new one.

From 1940 to 2020, then, there have been four generational waves of how to do church. We might think of these as eras of church growth, each a response to the social circumstances of its time and also often a reaction to the ministry model that came before it. This book predicts the paradigm of the next twenty years, and therefore it describes a full century of church growth eras—the eighty years behind us and the twenty years still ahead.

From 1940 to 2020, there have been four generational waves of how to do church.

For the moment we will tour the first three eras, which extend from about 1940 to 2000. Keep in mind that dates are approximate. There are always churches that exemplify an era before I say it begins and after I say it ends. Also note that I display the models and the differences between them in

high contrast to make them easier to recognize even though many churches were never pure examples of just one paradigm. Caveats aside, the purpose of our tour is to show how generations of twentieth-century assumptions still pressure twenty-first-century leaders to define success by the input results of the Lower Room.

The Wartime Revival (1940–1960)

In 1940, multiple challenges stressed Protestant churches in the United States. In addition to the national crises of economic depression and a spreading, global war, fundamentalists were still

licking their wounds from losing denominational institutions and cultural influence to liberals in the church and the academy in the 1920s, and they were still huddling behind circled wagons in their religious tribe.¹

But a national religious revival began during World War II that generated enormous church growth. The uplift in church attendance became most pronounced during the early years of the Cold War. The growth came from two sources that were neither precisely inside nor outside the church. In this era, church growth came from *beside* the church, the interface between congregations and wider movements.

One of the growth engines was the work of an emerging generation of fundamentalists who wanted to reenter and influence American society again. They wanted to hold to orthodox doctrinal convictions, but they were tired of playing defense and sought to reengage the nation with the gospel and biblical truth. Some were intellectuals and institution builders who labored to replace the structures lost to liberals in the previous generation.² But others were a band of evangelists who captured young people's attention under the banner of Youth for Christ (YFC).

These evangelists gave the Anglo-American revivalist tradition a facelift and found eager audiences. In 1943, they began filling arenas with teenagers looking for something to do in their cities amid the gasoline rationing of the war. Soon thousands were making commitments to Christ. After the war, YFC preachers expanded their appeal to a broader audience, and the movement went supernova when William Randolph Hearst's newspapers began publicizing the 1949 Los Angeles tent meeting of YFC evangelist Billy Graham.

The other growth engine of the wartime revival was the looming threat of global communism following World War II, intensified by the danger of nuclear annihilation. Americans increasingly saw their country not only as the guardian of democracy and liberty against totalitarianism but also as the godly opponent of "godless communism" (a common slogan of the day), a link

that Graham himself implicitly encouraged in his preaching. The term “Judeo-Christian” was coined to fold previously marginalized Catholics and Jews into the Protestant nation as a united front. “Under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance; “In God we trust” was made the national motto. Americans broadly agreed with then-president-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower’s remark: “Our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is . . . but it must be a religion with all men created equal.”³

The church came to be seen again as a highly important community institution, a rallying point for upstanding citizens, and therefore a place to see and be seen. During the Eisenhower administration, as many as four out of five Americans attended a worship service on a given weekend, the highest mark in American history. As a community institution, however, the church was often indistinguishable from the exploding number of fraternal, charitable, and youth organizations, all of which gathered doers of good and were sanctified by ritual prayer at their orderly meetings.

Growth in the wartime revival came from next door to the church—from the parachurch and civil religion. The church’s job was to be a stalwart, soul-saving, morals-inculcating, nation-supporting pillar of the local community alongside others. The individual Christian’s job was to be a godly community member and attend revival meetings featuring traveling evangelists, forming the “studio audience” for the spectacle in which sinners in attendance might be saved. Between genuine awakening by the Spirit of God and patriotic anxieties, churches did not have to do much to grow in the 1940s and ’50s besides unlock the door on Sunday morning.

The Golden Era of Denominationalism (1960–1980)

By the time Eisenhower yielded the White House to John F. Kennedy in 1961, the wartime revival was losing steam. National unity

was beginning to be torn apart over segregation and civil rights and soon by Vietnam, the sexual revolution, feminism, and a devastating loss of faith in the trustworthiness of institutions. New Age religion would eventually present Americans with spiritual options far outside the Judeo-Christian mainstream.

But the church did not know this at first. The problem it saw in 1960 was not a social or cultural problem but a demographic problem—and an opportunity.

The baby boom was in full swing, and home construction also boomed in the suburbs sprouting up around North American cities. Each denomination realized that if it did not erect buildings and plant congregations in the new communities, another denomination would—or no one would. In response, denominations set up franchises to suit church people's religious preferences in suburban growth areas.

The church-planting initiatives of the 1960s and '70s often had less to do with disciple making than with math. I once consulted with a United Methodist church in a Houston suburb that began growing explosively in the late 1970s. As I got to know the church, I watched a video that gave the pitch for why the church needed to be founded. Methodist brass knew that the community would grow by x residents in the ensuing years and that y percent of the new townspeople would be Methodists. Therefore, a church had to be founded to accommodate them. The church's job was to put door hangers at the homes of new residents to catch immigrating Methodists and perhaps draw in a few others.

I recently talked to a Southern Baptist denominational leader in Ohio who described the church growth of his era as "grits evangelism." Evidently southern pastors attempting to start a church in the north would wait and watch for people to pick

The church-planting initiatives of the 1960s and '70s often had less to do with disciple making than with math.

up a box of grits in the supermarket aisle. Then they would introduce themselves as the pastor of a new Southern Baptist church in town in hopes of winning new congregants.

There were few established community organizations in new suburbs, so the church responded by becoming a full-service community organization itself, a place where something was on the calendar for some member of the family every day of the week, catering to every need and interest. There was a program for everyone, from a choir to a softball team to Alcoholics Anonymous to a women's Bible study while the kids were in school to a men's breakfast on Saturday morning. New church constructions featured Christian education wings that resembled new elementary schools, and Sunday school became the relational connecting point for children and adults alike.

The church growth lessons of the golden era of denominationalism were first "if you build it, they will come" and second "a church for the whole family." The result was a programming philosophy that more is more. If a church had the volunteer force to staff a program and the money to build a facility for it, people would join the church to access it.

The New Permission Era (1980–2000)

The suburban church-planting strategy was in touch with the residential construction trends of its time, but it ignored the staggering cultural shifts of the Sixties (so-called; the period actually spanned from about 1963 to about 1974). By 1980, it was no longer safe to assume that people were looking to attend a church of the denomination in which they were raised. More seriously, it could not be assumed that people were looking to attend church at all, even though the vast majority had a church background.

Emerging leaders began to grapple seriously with the problem of reaching millions of lost, dechurched baby boomers and their

families. Some—most prominently Rick Warren in Orange County, California, and Bill Hybels in suburban Chicago—attempted to go back to the drawing board, discard the church paradigms they knew, and design a relevant experience from the ground up that would draw lost people to Christ.

The church was to be built for the outsider, not the insider; everything was reimagined from the perspective of the “seeker,” a fairly new term in the ministry dictionary that rapidly rose in prominence. Formal was out and casual was in. The sound of worship and flow of the service were entirely converted to new forms springing from the soft-rock/folk songs of the 1970s Jesus Movement. Sermons started from the practical felt needs of semi-secular people and ended with biblical counsel rather than proceeding from the reading of a biblical text. The welcome of visitors—soon to be termed “guests”—was transformed by influence from the hospitality industry. Everything in the church ran on outstanding customer service.

The shift of the new permission era was in one respect the aftershock of a titanic economic shift that gathered momentum earlier in the century. According to Brian Sanders,

Futurist Paul Saffo argues that the industrial manufacturing complex was born on the impulse to overcome scarcity at the turn of the last century. The result is what he calls a “producer economy”—the hero of which was the manufacturer. Eventually these factories became so efficient that they were able to not only overcome scarcity, but to overproduce. As we created and accumulated more than we needed, consumption became the primary impulse. This new era gave us what we all recognize as a “consumer economy,” whose hero was the marketer, the one who could convince us to want what they were selling.⁴

Whereas the golden era of denominationalism was driven to mass-produce more churches and more programs for them to run, the new permission era was driven to market the faith to oversold, convenience-sensitive consumers.

There were dozens of easy-to-spot differences between a new permission church and a church built in an earlier era operating down the road. But the greatest difference was much deeper than drums versus organ or khakis versus suit, even deeper than home groups versus Sunday school; the new permission church saw itself as solely responsible to reach the lost for Christ. It did not expect any help from parachurch organizations, itinerant revivalists, civil religion, cultural Christianity, or denominational heritage. It functioned on the conviction that the local church was the only organization God put on earth to save people who disliked or dismissed what they thought they knew about the Christian faith.

Every aspect of the new permission church was built for this goal. Rick Warren asserted that a biblical church has five purposes, but the outline and page count of his book *The Purpose-Driven Church* gave away that evangelism was the prime purpose of Saddleback Community Church.⁵

Nevertheless, evangelism in the new permission church was conditioned by its organizational assumptions. New permission churches, especially the pioneering ones, talked about both the come-and-see and go-and-tell aspects of evangelism.⁶ It was Bill Hybels, after all, who taught believers to “just walk across the room” to an unsaved acquaintance.⁷ But the vast bulk of time, effort, energy, and manpower in the new permission church was devoted to perfecting the come-and-see part. Even go-and-tell personal evangelism shifted from “come to Jesus” to “come to my church.” The mature church member was expected to extend invitations to a weekend seeker service where the platform speaker would offer salvation.

Because of its organizational bias, the discipleship model in the new permission church was the assimilation funnel. The term “assimilation” itself reveals that the objective of discipleship was to make newcomers *similar* to others in the organization. The journey of growth in Christ was aligned with steps in a process of organizational participation from worship services to small groups to volunteer service. Growth, then, was measured by the number

of participants in each program in the process. The goal was to move people into the core—the church’s committed labor force and donor base—as the climax of Christian maturity. Growth in character was strongly desired and sincerely taught, but attendance, contributions, and volunteer hours were what counted because they *could* be counted. (We will explore the new permission assimilation funnel in greater depth in part 3.)

Three Generations of Assumptions

To repeat, churches pick up features of all the eras they pass through. Then they pass those features on to us leaders who were formed in the churches. We go on to serve churches that harbor these assumptions and that expect us to abide by them.

Table 1 - Three Eras of Church Growth, 1940–2000

	Wartime Revival (1940–1960)	Golden Era of Denominationalism (1960–1980)	New Permission Era (1980–2000)
Church Identity	Teaching center with promotion of national ideals as a community institution	Teaching center with doctrinal legitimacy and membership in a familiar faith family	Teaching center with applicable truth and ministry involvement at church
Ministry Philosophy	More is more	More is more	Less is more
Attraction Driver	Prominent option	Heritage option	Relevant option
Rally Cry	We are the best church in town	We are the best church in the tribe	We are the best church for the times
Evangelism Paradigm	Disciple as audience	Disciple as representative	Disciple as inviter
Worship Promise	Provide unity	Provide liturgy	Provide relevance
Connection Vehicle	Fraternal organization	Sunday school	Small group
Retention Method	Community service	Full service	Customer service
Maturity Model	Christian citizen	Program activity	Assimilation funnel

So what are some of the assumptions about growth that churches have absorbed over the years?

- Church growth is secured by individual commitments made in a decision at a public event.
- Church growth results in the church being a visible and prominent community institution.
- Church growth comes from providing programs that young families want to access.
- Church growth requires a culturally relevant and inspiring public experience with outstanding customer service and hospitality for the audience.
- Church growth is measured by the numbers of people attending and serving in worship services and other programs arranged as steps in a linear process.
- Above all, church growth has to do with what organizations do, not what individuals do, except insofar as individuals support the work of the organization.

All these assumptions silently pressure leaders to gauge their effectiveness in Christ's mission by body count—the number of people who show up at the organization's public events and the size of the building required to accommodate them. These assumptions pressure leaders to devote their energies to maintaining and improving the Lower Room. In addition, they pressure leaders to confuse assimilation with biblical disciple making.

I have more to say on the topic of measurement in part 2, but we are not done looking at what keeps leaders off mission just yet. Since churches and leaders crave church growth, an industry exists to meet that need. Unfortunately, the industry's most popular prescriptions for growth keep churches stuck in the Lower Room while real church growth remains elusive.

ATTENDANCE UPPERS

Three Pills Prescribed by Church Pharma

At the close of the previous chapter, I referred to an industry that exists to meet churches' and leaders' felt need for church growth. It is also worth mentioning, if it is not already evident, that I am part of that industry. The fact that you (or someone) paid to pick up a book called *Future Church: 7 Laws of Real Church Growth* makes that obvious all by itself.

We could call this field of enterprise the church-industrial complex. I also like to call it *Church Pharma*, an industry that produces and sells therapies to fix churches' health and growth problems.

I am happy to serve the church through Church Pharma. I've spent most of my professional life serving the Lord in this vein, and over that time—including today—I've had a hand in every industrial sector that I reference in this chapter. There is nothing I enjoy more than assisting churches in the mission God gave them, and I have found God calling me to do so in this field.

Yet there is a shadow side to Church Pharma. Think of it as the helping-selling dilemma.

Helping and selling are not opposites. To the contrary, every organization that genuinely resources the church—whether

for-profit or nonprofit—must both help the church and sell to it. An organization must help the church in order to be justifiable, but it must successfully sell to the church to be viable. If a resource purveyor isn't justifiable, it *shouldn't* last; if it isn't viable, it *won't* last. So, every legitimate organization serving the church wants to offer resources that both help and sell.

But a temptation lurks here. The helping-selling dilemma is this: *Do we offer what we know will help at the risk that it might not sell, or do we offer what we know will sell at the risk that it might not help?*

The trap is that it is much easier and quicker to know if a product sells than if it helps. In addition, the organization feels much more acute and immediate pain if a product doesn't sell than if it doesn't help. As a result, a good deal more pressure bears on the selling side than on the helping side.

It is much easier
and quicker
to know if a
product sells
than if it helps.

There is a great yet subtle temptation to call a sale a win even if it doesn't really help the people who bought the product.

Church leaders also feel pressure—especially pressure for the church to grow—so they feel a need for help in many areas. Busy leaders tend to be attracted to done-for-you resources, and they have been conditioned by the market to expect them. For these reasons, it does not take a complicated formula to make money trying to help the church.

For example, the largest consulting industry in the church since the 1960s has been capital campaign consulting, which is usually about investing in place in the Lower Room. This industry is sustained by the felt need of raising money for a church's building project coupled with the fear of loss and the promise of gain around fundraising.

A newer industry is church staff search—especially for churches with five hundred or more in attendance—which has grown rapidly over the last decade. The first felt need that drives talent search is

the fear of losing momentum when there is no lead pastor or key ministry staff in place; churches scramble to rebuild the personality factor of the Lower Room when it disappears. Another felt need is tied to program: because of the relentless urgency to keep Program Church afloat every Sunday, it is necessary to find talent fast to keep it going. Either way, hope is extended that somebody outside the system can come and maintain or grow the system.

Christian publishing is a much longer-established sector of Church Pharma. It caters to leaders' FOMO (fear of missing out) on the latest and greatest ministry ideas. The industry responds to the need by distributing the books of superstar pastors who are believed to have the answers. But it sells even more books when the book itself is the answer—that is, when a book is the heart of a campaign with an accompanying sermon series and discussion guide that promises to ramp up attendance or small group participation for an out-of-the-box numerical win.

Content marketing is a newer sort of publishing industry that has become its own sector of Church Pharma, but it also extends the other sectors at the same time. Online content aggregators meet the felt need for a convenient, no-cost, one-stop shop of successful techniques and keeping-up-with-the-Joneses comparisons with other churches. The content sector makes it easier for those who sell best to sell most, but it does not necessarily enable those who *help* most to sell most.

Taken as a whole, these felt-needs-driven industries are large and lucrative. The more these services profit, the more capital they have to invest in growing their product line and extending their marketing. Organizations get better, stronger, and faster at selling products, but their products almost universally fix a leader's focus on the Lower Room.

I do not mean to insinuate that the organizations of Church Pharma are primarily motivated by profit over a desire to build up the church. Rather, I am saying that profitability is easily taken as a proxy for real help to the church, and profit also accelerates how

An organization's products almost universally fix a leader's focus on the Lower Room.

much more the organization can sell. The organizations and industries that I am talking about do not sell bad things. It's just that the things they sell rarely address, much less solve, the church's overwhelming and supremely important challenge: how to move from faking disciples to making disciples.

In this chapter we look at some of the stuff that Church Pharma sells church leaders to cure what ails them.

These growth pills—the elixir of engagement, the medicine of multiplication, and the placebo of pastor change—are actively peddled and eagerly swallowed. Leaders take them because they promise to get their numbers up.

Engagement, multiplication, and pastor change—each of them does indeed have a legitimate definition, location, and function. When churches and their leaders are operating on a two-level floor plan with an Upper Room and a Lower Room, all of these are beneficial and even essential. But when the Upper Room is empty, these pills become something different than they were meant to be, and they exacerbate the Lower Room fixation of Program Church.

The Elixir of Engagement

In chapter 3, when I described how a church gets off mission, I observed that leaders habitually look at worship attendance as their primary or even sole measure of accomplishment. That said, most church leaders in North America these days aren't looking at that figure because it pumps them up. To the contrary, it weighs them down.

As I noted earlier, attendance figures are on the decline in churches of all kinds. Even churches that expect to grow each

year and are rarely disappointed have stumbled onto an attendance plateau. This is partly because the church struggles to demonstrate the relevance, value, and necessity of in-person church attendance to emerging generations of nonreligious people and even to believers. Yet it is also because attendance frequency is on the decline; in other words, regular attenders attend less often.

All church leaders recognize this phenomenon at some level, and the topic has gained traction in ministry literature over the past several years. In 2013 Thom Rainer called decreasing attendance frequency the number one reason for attendance decline.¹ My post on declining attendance frequency was the most read on my blog in 2015.² In the same year, five months after Carey Nieuwhof's podcast debuted, Nieuwhof interviewed me on that subject, and the topic reappeared as a chapter in his book *Lasting Impact*.³

Yet just because church leaders recognize that frequency decline has an effect on attendance doesn't mean they have quantified how significant the effect is. Let's say your committed attenders used to come to worship 3.2 times per month on average, but now they come 1.7 times per month (both reasonable estimates, though figures vary from church to church). The impact of the frequency decrease on your average weekly attendance is dramatic (see table 2).

Church growth is hard enough to come by, but it is even harder when you are rowing against the current of attendance decline. In this tidal shift, a church has to surge forward just to stand still—it has to grow just to maintain. Some churches are experiencing what I call “growteauing”: their number of regular worshipers is increasing while weekly worship attendance remains flat. Growteauing can be discovered and validated through careful measurement and statistical analysis, but a telltale sign is when attendance at a church's special events (such as Easter) increases year upon year but attendance on ordinary weeks stays the same.

**Table 2 – Effect of Decline in Attendance Frequency
at Different Congregational Sizes**

Number of Regular Worshipers	Past Average Worship Attendance Minus Guests (estimated 3.2x/mo)	Current Average Worship Attendance Minus Guests (estimated 1.7x/mo)
100	74	39
250	185	98
500	369	196
1,000	738	392
1,500	1,108	588
2,500	1,846	981
5,000	3,692	1,962
10,000	7,385	3,923
15,000	11,077	5,885

Average worship attendance is equal to the number of weeks of attendance per regular worshiper per month, times the number of regular worshipers,

This makes for a very troubling time to be a church leader, especially if your functional Great Commission exalts worship attendance as its first and foremost metric. Yet there is more than one way to respond to the crisis. One approach is to consider why Program Church has lost value in people’s eyes and to reimagine what it means to be the people of God biblically in a community. This is the approach I intend to take in this book.

But there is another approach advocated by some prominent voices. It is summed up in the phrase “engagement is the new attendance.” As the argument goes, mere attendance was never Jesus’s objective; he wanted people who were all in. We are now at a cultural moment in which casual Christians, mere attenders who are not all in, are no longer coming to church. The future of the church belongs to the highly involved and the seekers, who are really the people the church ought to consist of anyway (and

did in the first century). These engaged people will in turn drive attendance.⁴

I agree with 100 percent of this. The rub, however, comes at this question: What does “engagement” mean?

The default way to define engagement is participation in parts of the church program other than worship—most notably small group attendance, volunteerism, and giving. If a person is doing these things, they can be said to be engaged. A church can count even more people as engaged if it includes streaming views or attendance at a virtual campus. If you tinker with the numbers long enough, you can often find a formula that provides some good news about how engagement is going strong.

Don’t misunderstand me. I want all believers to engage in intimate groups of believers, in service to others, and in giving. These are all good and necessary activities for every follower of Jesus. And I am delighted when any true seeker encounters the gospel online. The problem is that these things still make for an inferior definition of engagement. Recalling the ministry machine metaphor from chapter 3, this just replaces tallying inputs with counting *throughputs*; that is, instead of adding up how many bodies go into the front end of the ministry machine (worship services), we are merely measuring how far people make it through the bowels of the machine (other programs). We still are not measuring outputs—actual changes in the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Focusing on this kind of engagement is not a cure; it is a painkiller. It is an incremental response, not a qualitative response; it treats symptoms instead of promoting health. It helps leaders feel better about their declining results by changing the scorecard; measuring online attendance, small group attendance, volunteerism, and giving makes the drop in Sunday worship attendance feel less painful. But it does not compel leaders to reinvent the church’s value proposition for a new era in line with a biblical model of mission. It continues to seek validation from attendance

at Lower Room programs, not from the impact of Upper Room disciple making *through* Lower Room programs.

The Medicine of Multiplication

A second pill that churches take to boost their attendance figure is *multiplication*—birthing new fellowships and worship gatherings in new places. As with the engagement activities described above, I am totally on board with multiplication; I believe it is essential and biblically faithful for a church to multiply. However, as with engagement, multiplication as commonly practiced can obscure a church's disciple-making reality and stymie, not stimulate, its development.

At the congregational level, perhaps the most popular manifestation of multiplication is *multisite*. My best attempt at a definition of multisite is a single congregation that originally gathered for public worship in one location but now gathers in multiple locations, yet it still considers itself a single congregation under one name and unified leadership.⁵

The first North American multisite churches may have come into being as early as the 1980s, but the breakthrough year was 1998. That year North Coast Church in Vista, California, began using video to broadcast the sermon to other locations on its campus. As video and communications technology evolved, it allowed North Coast to multiply locations off campus as well.⁶ Community Christian Church in Chicagoland hit upon the same solution at about the same time, and other churches followed soon after. Leadership Network reported the existence of five thousand multisite churches in 2012 and a figure of eight thousand two years later.⁷ Current estimates range as high as fifteen thousand churches.

There are several good reasons for a church to go multisite. If a church's Lower Room programs are pistons in a true Upper Room

disciple-making engine, going multisite can leverage the church's reputation for excellent quality to disciple more people. The drive to multiply sites also reminds members that the church exists for those who are not yet a part of it, so it fosters a missional mindset. Multisite churches take a great deal of people power to pull off, so they tend to activate a greater proportion of the congregation in service. This also raises senior leaders' awareness of their need for a leadership development pipeline and spurs them to take initial steps in developing one. In addition, going multisite may also be a move closer to local context, putting church where the people are and styling it in the way that is most suitable to them. (On the other hand, some multisite churches adopt the franchise model of identical venues, often amplified by a broadcast that elevates a single teacher's platform over local leaders, which is less sensitive to local context.)

In many cases, however, these are not the reasons that churches have taken the multisite route; they are merely side benefits. The main reason churches have gone multisite is simply to get bigger.

The generic, default, unexamined vision most commonly found in churches—especially churches less than thirty years old that have not peaked in their life cycle yet—can be summed up in one word: *more*. More people, more attenders, more volunteers, more staff, more reach—and now, more sites. With more as the motive, church leaders have found multisite to be a cheaper way to build a bigger box, which was often the thing they were really hoping for.

Ironically, multisite started as the bubble-gum-and-duct-tape solution to the problem of having more people coming than could fit into the building. Now, twenty years later, multisite is sold as a well-packaged solution to the problem of growth

With more as the motive, church leaders have found multisite to be a cheaper way to build a bigger box.

stagnation. Rather than going multisite to accommodate those who already want to attend, churches are using it to try to persuade more people to attend, with uneven results.

When multisite does not arise naturally from multiplying disciples, leaders, groups, and worship services, it is merely an extension of the Lower Room. The key determiner is whether reproducing disciples is viewed as the cause or as the effect of launching a new site. For example, one multisite consultant insists that the reason for going multisite is not to get a bigger church; rather, it “is about obeying the Great Commission to make disciples who make disciples who start churches that start churches.” He continues, “After the launch of a new multisite congregation, the key to retainability, sustainability and growth is doing the basics of discipleship and outreach in the community with the good news and good works of the gospel.”⁸ While these statements are true at face value, they also betray an assumption that multisite expansion is the basis for a new wave of disciple making rather than the other way around.

Unfortunately, the typical site launch requires so much energy to create a new funnel for attendance inputs that it saps strength from producing discipleship outputs. Leaders can unconsciously sink into a strategy that says, “We’ll get a big church first, then we’ll disciple the people who come.” But in the endless drive for the next one hundred people, actual disciple making stays on the back burner. In this scenario, multisite becomes a medication to increase a church’s apparent virility, not nutrition to increase its potency.

I know pastors who, in my discernment, should not be pushing their church in a multisite direction. Instead, they should focus their church’s energies on being renewed around disciple making. But these pastors are clinging with white knuckles to their need to add numbers, and multisite appears to them as the tried and true way to make it happen. As a result, they build additions onto the Lower Room instead of a staircase to the Upper Room.

But the problem with multiplication not only manifests in multisite; it can also appear in church planting. I have always been

and always will be passionate about church planting, so I cannot believe that a day would come that I would say this. Yet over the last twenty years, I have seen that church planting can appear to be disciple making when it actually is not. Three anecdotes illustrate the trend.

First, every year I coach at least a dozen church planters in the prelaunch phase of their plants. My role is to help them achieve clarity on a contextually appropriate vision before the church is born. The planters I work with are almost always young; as with any emerging generation, their perspectives are a mixture of openness to new ideas and an uncritical reflection—unable to conceive of an alternative—of what they have experienced in their formative years.

Over time working with these groups, I have encountered a consistent fifty-fifty split. Half of the church planters are making disciples who will become churches; the other half are planting programs. When I hear the planters articulate their disciple-making strategies, half are planting disciples and hoping for churches to come; the other half are planting churches and hoping for disciples to come.

My second anecdote further reveals how we multiply Program Churches while assuming we are making disciples. I was talking with the staff of a prominent church with a reputation for church planting whose pastor is a well-known advocate of sending. This church is good at raising up and sending professional church planters, but the pastors admitted to me, “We don’t have anything for the soccer mom; we’re not sending her.” To their credit, they commit considerable resources to multiplying organizations and sending willing workers to support them, but when it comes to the granular level of sending and multiplying individual disciples, they are at a loss about what to do.

The third story comes from the most uncomfortable initial church interview I have ever experienced as a consultant, which came about while I was penning these pages.

The second-chair pastor had invited me to his church, describing disunity among the staff; the senior pastor believed the church's vision was crystal clear, but others on staff disagreed. That was all I knew about the church, but the situation is not uncommon. My approach was not uncommon either; I began our meeting by asking the same question I ask every church in every condition: "What is your greatest growth challenge?" I began by listening to the answers of the less experienced staff members and gradually worked my way around the room. As the staff shared openly, however, I noticed the senior pastor becoming visibly frustrated.

When at last it was his turn, the pastor unloaded. He started by pushing back on my question by asking his staff, "Who told Will we have a growth challenge?" Unaware that I had merely asked a question that I ask every client, he was demonstratively defensive that anyone would imply his church was not growing. Then he dismissed the insinuation by insisting, "Our church's *total impact* is growing."

What evidence did the pastor give to support his rebuttal? He said the church had planted two churches in the past three years. That spoke volumes to me, because the contentious conversation I had with him and his staff does not happen when a church multiplies out of disciple making. Upper Room church planting does not rationalize an attendance plateau and make it uncomfortable for anyone to acknowledge reality as if it is an inadmissible, shameful secret. Healthy church planting is not a technique to put points on the board; it does not idolize attendance growth and then reproduce the idolatry in new churches and staffs. But that is what happens when church leaders reach for any Lower Room technique that promises to keep growth pointing up.

The Placebo of Pastor Change

As we have seen, church leaders are tempted to *simulate* growth by engagement in *programs*. They are also tempted to *stimulate*

growth by multiplication into more attractive *places*. But churches also *seek* growth by upgrading their chief *personalities*: their senior, lead, or solo pastors.

It is tricky for a church to get and keep a pastor who will bring growth. On the one hand, a pastor needs to survive challenges early in their tenure and develop trust with the congregation before the best stuff comes out of the relationship after about the fourth year. On the other hand, at some point both pastor and church get a bit too comfortable, and unless the pastor significantly reinvents or reenvisions their ministry after fourteen years of tenure (which is rare), the church begins to coast. Unpleasant as it may be to admit, growth often stalls because the senior pastor has become so familiar to the people and also because he or she is simply getting older. For these reasons, the charisma-driven, Lower Room attractor of personality no longer delivers the way it used to.

Meanwhile, a tantalizing option waits in the wings: a new pastor. When growth stalls or never gets started under a pastor, churches can swap in a new pastor who embodies a new direction and then ride the wave of energy that surges in the early part of their tenure.

Churches that want to pump up growth with the perfect pastor have roughly the same person in mind: a thirty-three-year-old married father of 2.3 kids. This candidate happens to have the same specs as the new attender the church most wants to attract, the sort of person who is likely to make the biggest overall contribution to the church now and in the future.

Churches selling themselves to attenders upgrade their pastors the same way that homeowners putting their houses on the market upgrade their kitchens—they aim for the new style that’s in vogue. Despite a church’s godliest intentions, the natural groove is to seek a strapping King Saul to make them like the other nations and lead them to victory. They don’t want much—only the best. I know one ministerial staffing professional who quips, “Every church wants Jesus riding a unicorn.”

Without a doubt, good pastoral leadership is critically important for a church's growth, and fortunately there are many gifted leaders out there. But getting a new pastor is often a Lower Room placebo. It does not actually improve the body's disciple-making health; it merely gives the body the appearance of recovery because the patient expects it to work. I don't mean to diminish the genuine seeds that a pastor can sow for a bountiful discipleship harvest in a church in the first two years of ministry, but they take time to develop. The typical honeymoon surge in attendance is not the fruit of a new pastor's strong disciple-making leadership but rather personality-driven novelty.

Can You Trust the Paradigm?

The three pills we have looked at in this chapter are only a portion of Church Pharma's whole medicine cabinet. For example, one popular book details systems to "drive growth" in churches, yet growth is entirely defined as getting more people into the big room on the weekend. If you search the work for specific terms, you will find "church" five hundred times, "grow" eighty-one times, and "attend" forty-nine times. Yet if you search for "disciple," "discipleship," or "disciple making," you will not find them at all. I have no problem with solid insights and techniques for a particular aspect of building a great Lower Room. The problem is confusing that one part with the whole of real church growth.

Here is another example. I haven't touched on one of Church Pharma's most popular therapies: the remedy of revitalization. Against the backdrop of the epidemic stagnation and decline of small and long-established churches, a cottage industry has boomed to provide solutions for pastors in these ministry settings. But the wholesome and necessary prescriptions written by revitalization experts—biblical teaching, good leadership, organizational health, spiritual growth, local outreach, even prayer—do not get

at the root cause of decline in these churches. They do not sufficiently grapple with the oppositional forces churches are facing today that were not so strong even twenty years ago. And they do not adequately point pastors and churches to the Upper Room.

Revitalization didn't work in Cory Hartman's churches the way experts predicted. Read his story at futurechurchbook.com/bonus.

All the interventions of Church Pharma described in this chapter remind me of something Professor John Hannah said during my seminary days. When telling and interpreting stories from church history, he often said, “They did the wrong things for the right reasons.”

Over my years as a consultant, I have witnessed this feature of human nature many times. When I sense that a client is raising their defenses in the face of an uncomfortable reality, I often respond, “I trust your heart; I just don’t trust your paradigm.” A person can have the healthiest heart in the world, but if their eyesight is bad, they are still liable to miss a turn and take the wrong road.

This could be said both about Church Pharma and about the thousands of faithful church leaders who buy what it sells. I trust their hearts’ intent but not the paradigm by which problems are defined and solved. I do not trust a paradigm that appears to be ignorant of the Upper Room, that confuses it with the Lower Room, or that promises Upper Room results out of Lower Room hustle. I do not trust a paradigm that appeals to pastors who want to make disciples but only keeps their churches faking disciples.

It’s past time for a different paradigm.

INTERLUDE

The Missional Reorientation

In chapter 4 I traced the evolution of church growth from about 1940 to 2000. The rest of this book describes the fundamental principles of Future Church, which I believe will prevail over the next twenty years. Before we explore the era to come, however, we must bridge the gap by briefly touring the period from 2000 to 2020, a time that I call the *missional reorientation*.

Around the year 2000, some vocal thinkers began sharply critiquing the church paradigms of earlier eras, including the new permission era. They did not stop at the recent past either; indeed, it was not unusual for them to criticize standard modes of doing church going all the way back to the Roman emperor Constantine in the fourth century. These thinkers were sometimes painted with a broad brush as “emergent,” a fuzzy label that was coming into vogue at the time, but it soon became apparent that many of them had different concerns than the leading lights of that camp. Instead, the term that became most associated with their school of thought was “missional.”

The missional perspective brought a significant paradigm shift from the new permission era while still promoting an outward-facing posture for God’s people. Both new permission ministry leaders and missional thinkers believed that God ordained the local church to reach the world with the gospel. Evangelism and missions could not be delegated to a parachurch organization, a

traveling show, or secular structures that encouraged faith. They were the church's job.

Yet the missional movement followed that belief to a more radical place than new permission ever dreamed of going. Although new permission churches owned the importance of evangelism, they did so with a focus on methodology, not identity. In the new permission era, church leaders designed churches that the unchurched would love to attend. Their playbook involved drawing people to and revolving them around a central church location, a pattern that was as old as the late Roman Empire.

Missional thinkers, by contrast, pushed the conversation to recalibrate the very identity of God's people. The point wasn't to have a church with a missions department but to have a missional church. The focus on the church's identity flows out of an understanding of God's identity as a God on mission. The Great Commission of this era is John 20:21: "As the Father has sent me,

I am sending you." The goal is to see each person as an everyday missionary, living sent where they live, work, and play.

The focus on the church's identity flows out of an understanding of God's identity as a God on mission.

Naturally, then, everything missional stresses the church scattered as a counterbalance to the church gathered. Church is not where you go for a few hours each week but who you are 24/7. Missional proponents made provocative statements like, "It is not so much that the church of God has a mission as the mission of God has a church."¹ They sought to transform the imaginations of Christ followers to see themselves as the church on the move and to see the gathered experience as a secondary function of believers' primary identity. As the new permission era reflected the shift from a producer economy to a consumer economy, the missional reorientation anticipated a shift to a creator economy, one that

revolves around the individual as producer instead of the organization as producer.²

By reimagining church, missional thinkers fundamentally challenged the soundness of the new permission assimilation funnel. Yet because the mental shift the missional reorientation required was so elemental and so contrary to how church leaders had been formed, this era of church growth thinking differed from all that came before. Unlike previous eras, no predominant lived-out model emerged for others to imitate. The missional paradigm, therefore, became a provocative and powerful emphasis that gave birth to various expressions and hybrid models. Many experimented, piloted, and dabbled. But it did not fundamentally change the face of the church over two decades of influence the way previous paradigms had.

It did change leaders' minds, however. Many pastors in this era, especially young leaders entering ministry, were shaped by missional concepts and examined the church they inherited through missional lenses. For this reason, I call this era the missional reorientation. Unlike the introductions of previous church growth paradigms, this one did not take place in ministry settings but in the minds of leaders who, fueled by holy discontent, looked for ways to put it into practice.

Missional ministry appeared in embryo in a variety of loosely connected streams. Unlike previous movements, it arguably did not begin in the United States—at least not solely—but in Great Britain and nations of the Commonwealth; an intellectual ancestor of the movement was British missionary Lesslie Newbigin. The first American church organizations to show interest were not in the evangelical orbit but among theological moderates in the Protestant mainline who invited presentations from thinkers like Australians Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost and Canadian Alan Roxburgh. This initial intellectual embrace in the mainline rarely became practical, but missional concepts began establishing an organizational footprint among evangelicals with networks like

Forge, The Missional Network, Verge, and an organization that I started with Alan Hirsch, Neil Cole, Dave Rhodes, and Jessie Cruikshank called 100 Movements. It also exerted influence on conference platforms like Future Travelers, Presbyterian Global Fellowship, Sentralized, and Exponential.

Missional thinking was applied in Upper Room-only form in organic churches (i.e., House Church), as led and described by Neil Cole and others. Meanwhile, other strategists worked to put the public, organized church on a missional footing. Mike Breen pioneered missional disciple making in England and brought its principles to the United States through 3DMovements (3DM), consulting with churches to form missional-new permission hybrids. Acts 29 sought to plant missional churches with a forceful, Reformed Baptist character. Meanwhile, Tim Keller had quietly been formulating a missional theological vision and “middleware” for churches in cosmopolitan megacities, eventually launching an international church-planting initiative, Redeemer City to City.

It is impossible to list everyone involved in the missional church conversation. In addition, my purpose is not to tell a comprehensive story but to position what I call Future Church in the context of what has come before. My intention is for Future Church to synthesize the insights and priorities of the missional reorientation and apply them to the institutional church. Future Church approves and continues to amplify the missional character of hybrid churches in the first decades of the twenty-first century. This is only possible because, over a twenty-year span, missional principles have changed the minds of a critical mass of church leaders who want more than the church is currently producing.

The Seven Laws

The foundational propositions of Future Church are expressed as seven laws. These encapsulate the principles of organized disciple

Table 3 – Five Eras of Church Growth, 1940-2040

	Wartime Revival (1940-1960)	Golden Era of Denominationalism (1960-1980)	New Permission Era (1980-2000)	Missional Reorientation (2000-2020)	Future Church (2020-2040)
Church Identity	Teaching center with promotion of national ideals as a community institution	Teaching center with doctrinal legitimacy and membership in a familiar faith family	Teaching center with applicable truth and ministry involvement at church	Teaching center with mindset shift to be the church not just go to church	Training center where disciple- making is expected of everyone
Ministry Philosophy	More is more	More is more	Less is more	Out is more	To be is more
Attraction Driver	Prominent option	Heritage option	Relevant option	Community option	Training option
Rally Cry	We are the best church in town	We are the best church in the tribe	We are the best church for the times	We are the best church for the city	We are the best church for your calling
Evangelism Paradigm	Disciple as audience	Disciple as representative	Disciple as inviter	Disciple as missionary	Disciple as reproducer
Worship Promise	Provide unity	Provide liturgy	Provide relevance	Provide encounter	Provide integration
Connection Vehicle	Fraternal organization	Sunday school	Small group	Missional community	Microgroup
Retention Method	Community service	Full service	Customer service	City service	Vocational service
Maturity Model	Christian citizen	Program activity	Assimilation funnel	Living sent	Multiplying practice

making, and they succinctly state what distinguishes real church growth:

- *The Law of Mission*: real church growth starts with a culture of mission, not worship.
- *The Law of Power*: real church growth is powered by the gospel, not relevance.
- *The Law of Love*: real church growth is validated by unity, not numbers.
- *The Law of Context*: real church growth is local, not imported.
- *The Law of Development*: real church growth is about growing people, not managing programs.
- *The Law of Leadership*: real church growth is led by calling, not celebrity.
- *The Law of Vision*: real church growth is energized by shared imagination, not shared preference.

These laws are more than simple steps or handy how-tos. Rather, they are principles that must forge our conviction and then our practice or else the best church growth tactics in the world will devolve into faking disciples.

These Seven Laws of the Upper Room, therefore, start with the heart. They challenge the leader to first ask, “What is really happening in my church today?” I have aimed in part 1 to reveal the gnarly strength of the Lower Room paradigm. The wording of each law contrasts a Lower Room reality—worship, relevance, numbers, importation, programs, celebrity, and preference—to an Upper Room possibility. Like the law of gravity, I don’t see these as opinions but as the true science of the Spirit that is acting on us every day. If you choose to ignore them, you can stay the course with Program Church and cling to an illusion. If you choose to embrace them, they just might warm your heart and kindle new courage. You just might fall in love with ministry again.

As you wrestle with each law, they will illuminate a pathway that is new yet familiar in a strangely spiritual sense. I hope the laws bring you hope in the wonderful Upper Room possibilities of mission, gospel, unity, localness, people, calling, and imagination. You were made to lead in and from the Upper Room!

Fittingly, the Seven Laws are arranged in parallel with what the medieval church called the Seven Virtues (see table 4). The first three laws correspond to the three theological virtues of 1 Corinthians 13:13: the Laws of Mission (hope), of Power (faith), and of Love. On that foundation I build four more laws that correspond to the four cardinal virtues of Greek philosophy—the Laws of Context (temperance), of Development (fortitude), of Leadership (justice), and of Vision (prudence). I know that at first glance the dots don't necessarily connect. But I think you will enjoy how this correlation cultivates interest and understanding as we dive into each law.

In part 1 we deconstructed Program Church to give us a clear space to build on. In part 2 we construct the Upper Room by exploring its Seven Laws one by one. For each, I attempt to establish

Table 4 – Seven Virtues and Seven Laws of the Upper Room

Virtue Sets	Seven Virtues	Seven Laws
Theological Virtues	Hope	The Law of Mission
	Faith	The Law of Power
	Love	The Law of Love
Cardinal Virtues	Temperance	The Law of Context
	Fortitude	The Law of Development
	Justice	The Law of Leadership
	Prudence	The Law of Vision

its biblical basis, contrast it with much of Church As We Know It, and give examples of how it plays out in real life.

Before we take actions, we establish convictions; there is no practical without principle. The next step for Future Church leaders, then, is to learn the rules of the Upper Room.

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